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PLAY

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→DEEP DIVE

ELDEN RING SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

Leads our...

N

OPEN WORLD SPECIAL

Devs interviewed, and history charted – we celebrate your favourite worlds to get truly lost in!

→REVIEWED!

DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

Deliciously essential open world action

→REVIEWED!

RISE OF THE RONIN

Ninja Gaiden's devs reinvent their style

→HANDS-ON

SYNDUALITY ECHO OF ADA

Dare you pilot your Cradle Coffin mech?

+

PLANET ZOO COMES TO PS5: THE EXPERT CONSOLE VERDICT

NUN COMPARE WITH THE SURREAL INDIKA

FROM SAN FRAN WITH GAMES – THE GDC EXPERIENCE

→ BEAST MODE

MONSTER HUNTER'S BEHEMOTH FUTURE

Why the series is poised for to take over the world again!

→ UPLOAD THIS

SYSTEM SHOCK'S SUBLIME REMAKE

How Nightdive breathes new life into these cyber-zombies

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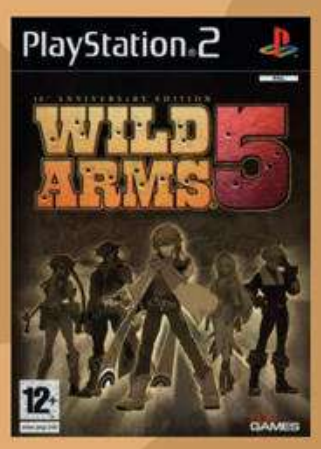

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Welcome

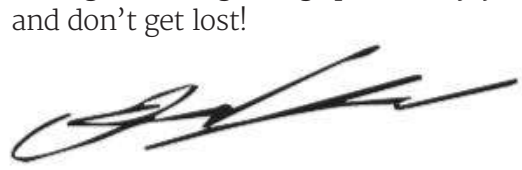
One of the best things about gaming as a medium is how easy it is to get immersed into new and exciting worlds. When we're controlling a character, we *are* that character, meaning these gaming places are, in a sense, real places we're inhabiting for as long as we're able to keep hold of that controller.

This month, we're celebrating the experience of open worlds and realms of immersion. There's no better way to kick it off than with Elden Ring: Shadow Of The Erdtree (p42), a truly hefty expansion to FromSoftware's first stab at creating a traditional open world. The studio's approach has changed a bit this time around, dialling in on what made the base game great.

From there, we get our passport stamped to travel to more gaming worlds, and to talk to those who helped craft them (p52). We chat with several developers about what goes into creating these big worlds, across all sorts of genres, whether it's Cyberpunk 2077's detailed Night City or the sprawling maps in Baldur's Gate 3. We also ask: what even is an open world anyway? It's something that's changed a bit over time, making a generation-by-generation history of the genre from PS1 to present (p62) a great way to cap off our journey.

Or it would be, if we didn't have two huge new open worlds to get stuck into. Dragon's Dogma 2 (p74) and Rise Of The Ronin (p80) are the biggest ones you'll be playing on PS5 this year, and represent the medium at its finest.

Open or not, there are more worlds to get lost in this issue as well. Monster Hunter expands its horizons with new genres (p6), Synduality (p36) has us working to survive as we explore a ruined land in special mechs, and System Shock (p26) shrinks our worlds to a small but dense and deadly space station. And who can forget the world of baseball that is MLB 11: The Show (p110)? We hope in some ways this mag itself is a gateway of sorts for you to connect to all sorts of new worlds throughout the gaming sphere. Enjoy reading, and don't get lost!



Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR
play@futurenet.com
@MrOscarTK

GAME OF THE MONTH
Dragon's Dogma 2
BEST WORLD
Moebius (Sonic)

STAY UPDATED
SIGN UP TO
OUR WEEKLY
NEWSLETTER

THIS MONTH'S WORLD WARRIORS

Jeremy Peel
CONTRIBUTOR
Was trapped in a garage and forced to do hand-brake turns before he could begin his charting of PlayStation's open worlds.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Open Roads
BEST WORLD
Fallout

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
This choom's stim is a preem world worth getting lost in. Without the chrome for brain-dance, it's PS5 for now.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Harold Halibut
BEST WORLD
Faerûn (Baldur's Gate)

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
Finally a Monster Hunter that allows Mim to befriend beasts. Though can a Rathalos pal usurp her palicos at home?

GAME OF THE MONTH
Planet Zoo
BEST WORLD
Witcher 3's

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
He thought he got out, but Night City keeps dragging him back, as do others in this *ahem* battle of the lands world tour issue.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Rise Of The Ronin
BEST WORLD
Red Dead Redemption 2

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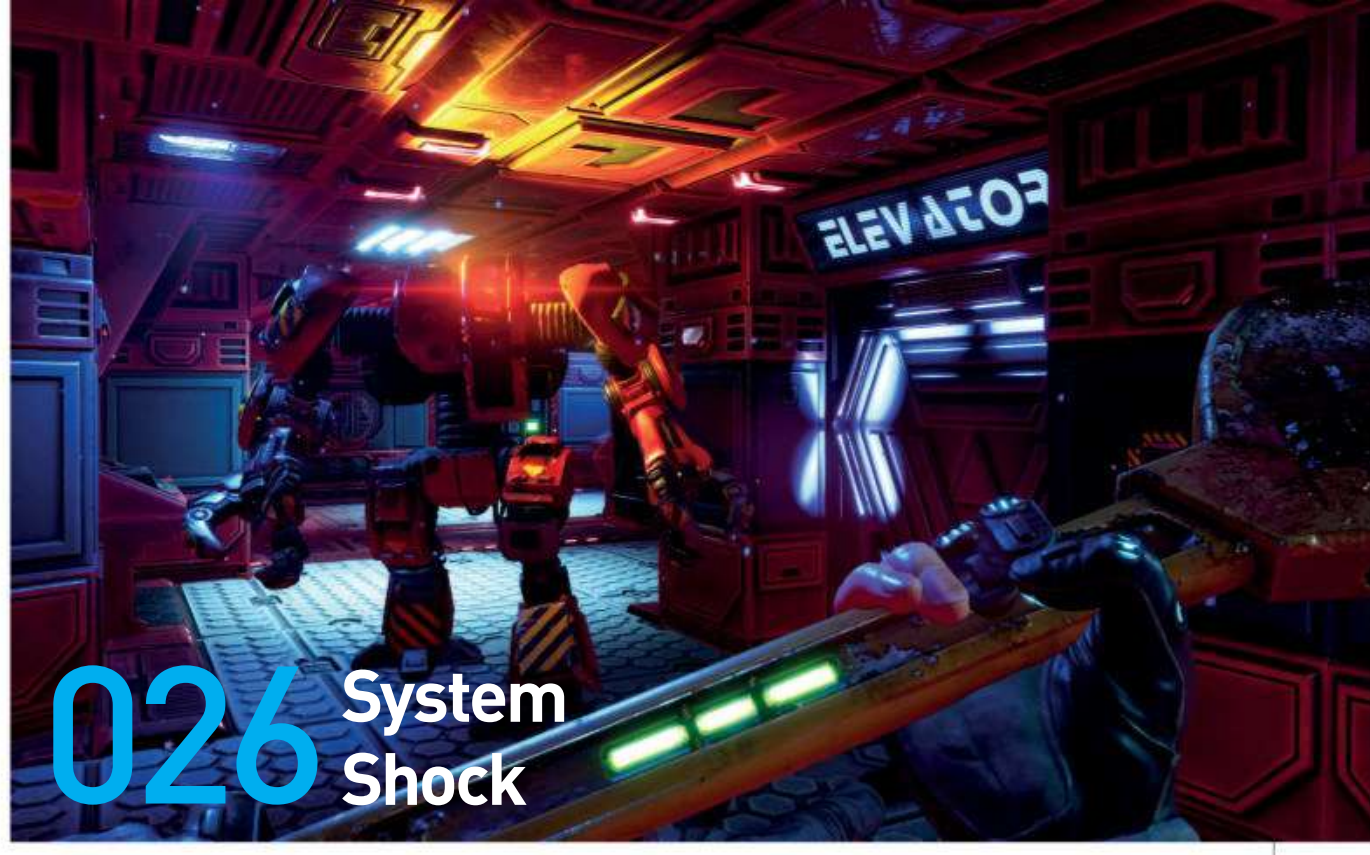

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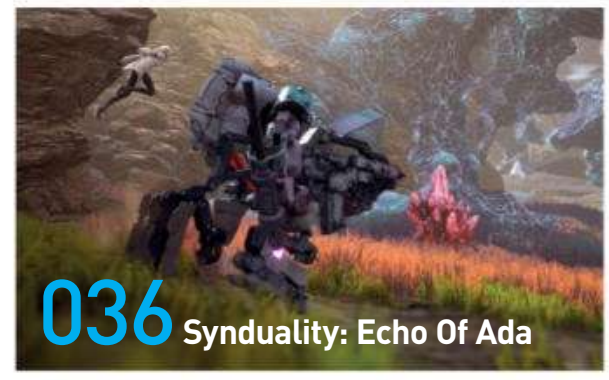

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They'll be falling *very* hard in Eternal Strands

The power fantasy of Stories is having fearsome monsters like Brachydios fighting on your side for once.

Tracking Monster Hunter's future

Ahead of Monster Hunter Wilds next year, two story-focused spinoffs come to PlayStation

You may find it hard to believe, but it's been more than six years since Monster Hunter: World roared its way onto PS4 and transformed Capcom's once-niche series into a global success. Its momentum has only accelerated in the years since, following the equally excellent Iceborne expansion in 2019, and culminating in the announcement of Monster Hunter Wilds at last year's Game Awards.

Yet between these, much of the series' expansion has taken place away from PlayStation. There was the 2020 movie adaptation (although its star Milla Jovovich did make an appearance in World via a special collaboration event) and the AR-based mobile title Monster Hunter Now, not to mention an appearance in the Oscar-nominated movie Tár that no-one saw coming. But just as Rise got its belated release last year, we're also finally getting another title, or rather two, on PlayStation for the first time.

Monster Hunter Stories and Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings Of Ruin both arrive on 14 June (and they're also available together as a collection). As spinoffs co-developed by Marvelous, with the original developed before World, Stories is a rather different beast to the mainline series – in case the name isn't a giveaway, it has more of a focus on a single-player narrative than the loop of slaying huge, ferocious monsters. In fact, having 'Hunter' in the name is a bit inaccurate as your character is a rider. Rise may have added wyvern riding but that's still a part of the hunt, whereas in Stories riders befriend monsters, forming bonds, or kinship, with them.

EGGY BRED

You don't only become pals with monsters in the wild, though. Instead, you sneak into a monster's den and steal one of its eggs, then form a bond using the power of a Kinship ore the moment it hatches. It does sound a bit dodgy if you think too hard about it, though maybe it's not much weirder than suddenly regarding monsters like Velocidrome, Barroth, or series icon Rathalos, which you've spent hundreds of hours hunting, as your new mates – they're even referred to as 'monsties', an incredibly twee portmanteau of 'monster' and 'bestie'.

Steal a monster's egg, then form a bond using the power of a Kinship ore when it hatches.

When Monster Hunter already has talking cats, it's a no-brainer that Navirou acts as your mascot buddy, like Persona 5's Morgana.

It's not a totally alternate universe, though, as hunters do exist in Stories, and have opposing ideals to riders. Plus when a sickness called the Black Blight starts causing monsters to go on destructive rampages, it gives hunters more of an excuse to sharpen their blades and solve this problem the old-fashioned way.

Stories does bear many of the hallmarks of the main games. Its cuter

THAT'S A RATH

As Capcom's already made an anime of Stories and a CG animation acting as a prologue to World, we can imagine it taking another Monstrous swing at the big or small screen – if the studio can get Cate Blanchett involved, even better.

anime-style aesthetics arguably means it skews towards a younger audience, but elements like village quest boards and gathering and combining materials are present, and fashioning gear from monster parts is still part of the activity (though the game conveniently doesn't show how you acquire those parts after defeating a hostile monster).

MONSTIE MASH

The most dramatic difference is noticeable during clashes with other monsters, as Stories is essentially a turn-based RPG. Quite the departure from the series' epic real-time hunts, then, but not dissimilar from other creature-catching games like World Of Final Fantasy or Digimon. But while they have a more stylised look compared to their photorealistic textures in World, these monsters are recognisable, and as ferocious as you'll know them to be from the main series.

In battle, you and your monstie use a paper-rock-scissors attack triangle system – in this case, the points are power, speed, and technical, also conveniently colour-coded. There's obviously a tactical layer in using the right attack, though your monstie tends to use a specific attack style – and getting the advantageous hit is also the best way of filling up your kinship gauge. When full, that's when you can ride your monstie and, united, unleash the most powerful attacks.

Outside battle, riding your monstie is the best way to get around and explore, especially when you're seeking out monster dens. The raptor-like Gendrome and Velocidrome can, for instance, jump to higher platforms, while Azuros can break through rocks blocking your path – and nothing quite beats riding a wyvern monstie who can fly. Different environments call for different actions, which will give you reason to switch between the monsties in your party, just as you may in battle.

Both Stories games are interesting alternatives to the mainline games, allowing you to explore the Monster Hunter world and presenting a more harmonious relationship between humans and monsters (though let's not forget the Wyverians, one of whom plays a more significant role in the sequel). But while each Stories is a substantial package in its own right, especially for players with an appetite for a challenging endgame, we do wonder if that will be enough to satiate those more eager for another proper hunt.

Fortunately, series producer Ryozo Tsujimoto has already hinted that we'll see more of Wilds this summer so it's not like fans will be left dining on yesteryear's leftovers. We're most intrigued to see how the series will embrace a full, living, breathing open world where the kind of traversal and verticality seen in Rise is possible, and how existing monsters as well as new ones will fit into it. Overdue ports are all well and good, but new fresh meat? Mmm, tasty!

*** Monster Hunter Stories Collection rides onto PS4 on 14 June.**

> **The most dramatic difference is noticeable during clashes – Stories is essentially a turn-based RPG.**

Stories might seem like lighter fare, but hey, don't you dare call these monsties cute.

1

2

3

4

5

1 Snatching eggs is easier than in the mainline games: you just have to make it out of the monster's den. **2** An open world where creatures come in impressively animated herds? RE Engine does it again! **3** Unpredictable weather conditions could really change up even a seemingly familiar map. **4** A rideable feathered friend is sure to take Wilds to great heights. **5** The Stories games are mechanically very similar to each other, but if you were to pick one, the sequel's got a larger cast of characters.

1

PLAY INVESTIGATES

Come and GDC it all

San Francisco's biggest gaming conference isn't just for developers, but as Rollin Bishop discovers, it helps

Despite having been doing some version of this job for 16 years now, 2024 was my very first time at Game Developers Conference (GDC) at San Francisco's Moscone Center. I've done PAXs and I've done E3s, Summer Game Fests and Gen Cons and more. But never GDC, until now, and if there's one takeaway to sum up my experience, it's this: I was a fool to have waited this long.

From my admittedly neophyte perspective, GDC is really what you make of it. There are talks, the expo floor, and meetings galore to be had. There are also numerous extracurricular events and parties. You can even just sit out in the nearby gardens chatting to folks if you really want to. For journalists like me, GDC is one long meeting interspersed with walking and panels. For students looking to get a foot in the door of the games industry, it's about networking. For seasoned developers, it's about securing funding, meeting vendors, or scouting potential applicants.

What's not up for debate are the facts. According to the organisers, nearly 30,000 folk attended the week-long conference, which had over 1,000 speakers, more than 700 sessions and the like, and 325 exhibitors. That's nothing to sneeze at considering there's much more of a business-like atmosphere to the whole ordeal than the public funfair that was E3.

UNREAL EXPECTATIONS

That's not to say there's nothing for fans and PLAY readers to get excited about.

1 Huge signs outside and inside made it clear that San Francisco's Moscone Center was the place to be for game developers large and small. **2** Wednesday's A Developer's Concert took us through the history of game scores, conducted by Austin Wintory (Journey, Abzû, Assassin's Creed Syndicate). It's on YouTube too! **3** The secrets of game design are here, and not actually so secret. It's useful for developers to share with their peers, and fascinating for anyone interested in the hobby. **4** Awards for devs, chosen by devs. Larian's Swen Vincke picked up multiple.

Images via flickr.com/photos/officialgdc under CC 2.0

From the outside looking in, the annual State Of Unreal from Epic Games is always a high point of GDC, and I can now confirm that watching it on stream pales in comparison to actually sitting in the audience – and not just because I could tilt my head and read the teleprompter, learning what was just ahead before anyone watching at home. It didn't hurt that the technology in the Marvel 1943: Rise Of Hydra trailer (see p12 for more!) is deeply impressive, showcasing just how powerful Unreal's toolset can be. With studios here to show off their tech for the future and share advice in equal measure, GDC is the home of the cutting edge.

The collaborative atmosphere at GDC is palpable. There's a real sense that no matter where you're from, there are tips to be shared behind the raised curtain, be it between rival developers and platform holders in attendance or the international attendees. This is a space where even the most secretive studios aren't afraid to get into the nitty-gritty among peers – even Nintendo is open about the development process here. Likewise, Insomniac Games got into how it managed Spider-Man 2's detailed animations, Remedy Games spoke about its impressive workflows, and Larian Studios devs detailed plenty about Baldur's Gate 3, from their TikTok strategy to performance direction. It's refreshing to see, and members of the public can view some for free in the GDC Vault (to see everything otherwise costs a hefty entrance fee, even digitally).

> **With studios here to show off their tech for the future and share advice, GDC is the home of the cutting edge.**

Even with my schedule dominated by talking to developers and seeing demos of games being played, there were plenty of hands-on opportunities, especially when it came to indies – after all, it's a great place for smaller studios to garner attention from potential investors and share what they're working on. To name just a few that I played and am now wildly excited to see more of: Arranger: A Role-Puzzling Adventure (more on p13) from Furniture & Mattress has a tile-moving mechanic that breaks my brain to think about and incredibly charming art, and Little Kitty, Big City from Double Dagger Studio (which is kind of like if Untitled Goose Game were more of a 3D platformer featuring a cat) deserves all the praise it's already received and then some.

With the death of E3 in the rearview mirror, it feels a little as though GDC and Geoff Keighley's Summer Game Fest might come to define the in-person events for the games industry, or at least my slice of it. And given my experience in San Francisco this time around, I wouldn't mind that prediction coming true in the slightest. I can only imagine how I might have felt if I'd managed to attend more of the talks on my watchlist in person. There's always next time!

*** GDC returns on 21-25 March 2025. Here's hoping for more revelations.**

HERO HOUR

Want other licensed Marvel games? Spidey developer Insomniac is working on Wolverine (and allegedly Venom, which leaked); Dishonored dev Arkane is working on Blade; and Dead Space dev Motive is doing an Iron Man one.

PlayStation voices

The month in mouthing off

"WE'RE NOT GOING TO MAKE NEW EXPANSIONS, WHICH EVERYBODY IS EXPECTING. WE'RE NOT GOING TO MAKE BALDUR'S GATE 4." LARIAN'S SWEN VINCKE REVEALS AT GDC THAT THE TEAM BEHIND THE SMASH HIT WILL MOVE AWAY FROM DUNGEONS & DRAGONS TO WORK ON THEIR OWN "NEW THING".

"THE TIME FOR HUMANKIND TO RECLAIM EARTH HAS NEARLY ARRIVED." OMINOUS? NO WAY. IT'S JUST DIRECTOR KIM HYUNG TAE ANNOUNCING THE FREE STELLAR BLADE DEMO.

"YES, WE ARE IN DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEXT CHAPTER," SAYS BETHESDA, CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF THE ELDER SCROLLS – AND BUILDS ARE PLAYABLE INTERNALLY.

Punch Nazis

Twin-superhero adventure Marvel 1943: Rise Of Hydra looks totally Unreal

It's rare for a game's graphics to truly astonish us these days, but this looks extremely good.

What's better than one superhero? Two superheroes! And even better than that? Getting to watch 'em beat the snot out of Nazis. So it goes with the Captain America and Black Panther game from Skydance New Media (helmed by Amy 'Uncharted' Hennig), now titled Marvel 1943: Rise Of Hydra.

It's set in Paris during the Nazi occupation during World War 2, with Captain America and Black Panther's interests perhaps not quite aligning (though we'll eat vibranium if they don't team up by the end). The former is along for the ride with Howling Commando ally Gabriel Jones, and the latter has the assistance of Nanali, head of the Wakandan Spy Network. All four are playable as you avoid enemy detection, sneak into base camps, and brain fascists. With a third super-soldier on the loose (Red Skull?), everyone, the Hydra faction included, is on the hunt for something called the Iron Force. Iron Man daddy Howard Stark is also in the mix — could he have something to do with it?

TECHED UP

Aside from that it's an ensemble game, not much is known about how Marvel 1943 will play. While the story is sure to play a big part, the reveal was made at the State Of Unreal event at GDC, meaning the tech powering the game has been the star of the show so far. It's being made in Unreal Engine 5.4 (the latest version), the developers making use of its MetaHuman tool for the character animation.

Supplementary footage released by Unreal shows things off in greater detail, including a pan of an area with a burning barrel that looks almost like live-action footage. Similarly, if watching the heroes emote in the story trailer didn't leave you thinking it looked like an MCU movie (4D scans and performance capture bring the actors into the game), walk cycles that have been revealed show how detailed every aspect of movement is, including clothes bunching in all the right places.

Does every game that impresses us on a technical level during development turn out to be just as excellent to play? Well, no. But with Amy Hennig behind this one, it feels like a solid bet. At the very least, as the recent MCU movies have continued to disappoint, it's time for another superhero game narrative to blow us away.

Marvel 1943 is set to come to consoles in 2025. Will we have a PS5 Pro by then?

Meet the RPA

Get pushy in Arranger: A Role-Puzzling Adventure

We've all seen top-down RPGs before, so you might wonder what's new about Arranger. Well, to begin with, its developers are calling the game a 'Role-Puzzling Adventure', after the unique fusion of genres that defines it.

While the RPG genre has always featured puzzles about pushing blocks around to some extent, we've never seen them forming as integral a part of the game world as they do here. Lead character Jemma's entire world is mapped to a grid that's easy to see, and as she moves so does everything in the same row or column, items shifting about the static screen and even looping around when they get to the edges. (Jemma herself also does this.)

But all these head-scratchers aren't one-and-done puzzles. As in a conventional RPG, exploring is still the name of the game, with traditional-looking towns, forests, and the like to work through, and so whether you're trying to get your hands on certain items or just want to progress from one spot to another, the movement mechanics are central to Arranger.

Which means that the game is friendly when it comes to a lot of the RPG elements that could bog things down when combined with puzzling – for example, it doesn't have experience points. Likewise, there's the option to make puzzles easier if you don't feel like stretching your brain muscles. There may be a delightful brazenness to this genre mashup, but it's not at the expense of player experience in the slightest. Importantly, the gorgeous visuals (from Braid artist David Hellman) keep you wanting to see what each screen has to offer, the hand-drawn visuals extending through all aspects of the game.

We've never seen block-pushing puzzles forming as integral a part of the game world as they do here.

Arranger: A Role-Puzzling Adventure slides its way onto PS5 this summer.

The world is stagnant – and lead characterJemma is literally going to rearrange things.

THE BIG SHOT

Threading the needle

Eternal Strands boasts big bosses and terrific tactility

Coming from new studio Yellow Brick Games, formed by former Bioware and Ubisoft veterans, this Unreal-Engine-5-powered action game is certainly going big. You play as Brynn, who's a Weaver, a kind of magical warrior able to bend the world to their whims (think telekinetically hurling both objects and yourself into the air, or freezing the air to create bridges to aid in exploration).

Mastery of this world is all about using physics tricks to gain an advantage. And you'll need them, as exploring the dormant nation of Enclave will prove dangerous. The ruins are full of creatures out to pull at your threads, and extreme weather events wreak havoc on the environment (though a skilled Weaver can use them for their own ends). On top of it all, you'll need to grapple with huge Arks, ancient weapons that we're told are a very specific 25 metres tall. Felling them won't be easy, and will involve clambering over them to land decisive blows, Shadow-Of-The-Colossus-style. That hands-on approach extends beyond grabbing hold and hoping for the best, though, as there's a tactical layer to slicing off bits of armour, using ice powers to hold enemies in place or even burn off their fur. While this is the first we've seen of Eternal Strands, the team have already been hard at work for four years, and expect to release the game on PS5 in 2025.

Numbers Game

We do the maths

£249.99

For the Elden Ring: Shadow Of The Erdtree Collector's Edition. Has any other DLC ever gone quite this extra?

12

Inches – the height of Square Enix's latest 2B figure, with a design based on Nier: Automata's anime adaptation, Ver.1.1A, due May.

500,000

Copies of Unicorn Overlord sold. Nothing mythic about this one!

42

Tracks on the Hi-Fi Rush Deluxe 4xLP boxset featuring the original soundtrack (not the licensed songs).

2,500,000

Arisen rose to Dragon's Dogma 2's challenge. How many pawns is that to spread dragonsplague, though?

176

Pages in The Elder Scrolls: The Official Survival Guide To Tamriel. Should you ever get sucked inside the game, this could be a lifesaver.

DEBATE

Which game should pamper our pets next?

Sqex Pets offers Square Enix-themed pet merch – which companies should follow suit?

MILFORD COPPOCK
MANAGING ART EDITOR

"A BEANIE FOR YOUR BEAGLE? FLARES FOR YOUR FELINE? YOU GOTTA BELIEVE!"

PaRappa The Rapper features enough different animals clad in bespoke attire to make the marketing people at (insert major pet retailer here) rub their hands with glee. Dogs, cats, amphibians, and insects are catered for, with costumes for all! A rapping dog? Check. A cat wearing flares and platform shoes? Yep. Hawaiian shirts for frogs? Sure, why not? A uniform for your motoring moose? Yeah, go on then. Admittedly the game also features an onion wearing a karate gi and sandals, but that's a *very* different marketing opportunity.

MIRIAM MCDONALD
OPERATIONS EDITOR

"NEIGHSAYERS MAY SCOFF, BUT IT'S WITCHER 3."

'Horses' and 'stylish' don't really go together – but they *could*, if CD Projekt decided to release sets of replica tack based on the stuff in The Witcher 3. With a mastercrafted saddle to protect your posterior, Ofieri saddlebags to carry whatever horsey people need to carry (sandwiches? A really *big* poop scoop?), and Undvik horse blinders for your Roach just because that interlace-patterned equine balaclava is really cool, you'd be the envy of the Pony Club. And impatient motorists would know to mind their manners as well as their speed if they encountered you on the road.

Dogs, cats, amphibians, and insects are catered for, with costumes for all!

OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
EDITOR

"WHY STOP AT FURRY FRIENDS WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY OTHERS TO CELEBRATE?"

Sticking to making merch to tie in with Square Enix's RPGs is fine with me, but I think the studio is forgetting about pets that are less furry in nature (or maybe that's just my bias as an allergy-ridden fluff-sneezer). Some of the huge worlds it's created would be great to reimagine in diorama form for smaller creatures. Final Fantasy VII is already a game all about layers, so how about making Midgar actually subterranean as a formicarium for ant friends? When creating their own network of tunnels, how will the little guys make Wall Market or the Sector 7 slums their own?

It'd be great to see this extend into other environments for other pets as well. Imagine a happy snake friend curled around Junon's massive cannon! We just ask that Sephiroth be kept well away from our reptilian allies.

JESSICA KINGHORN
GAMES EDITOR

"FOLLOW SUIT? THINK SNEAKING SUIT!"

My parents' puppy, Freddy, is a little diva. For my fellow dog lovers, he's a Jack Russell/Patterdale Terrier mix – in other words, he's a small black-and-white dog who's very cute and very smart, and knows it. As such, Sqex Pets is missing a trick by not offering Cait Sith wearables so Freddy may don a crown befitting the little prince he is. I'm not so sure we'd be able to keep the boots on his paws, mind you, so perhaps the studio doesn't need to make those.

That aside, Freddy's wiry coat often brings to mind the visage of many a furry-faced videogame protagonist, and I don't just mean other canines like Dogmeat. For me specifically, I keep seeing old Snake – though perhaps Konami shouldn't be crafting infinite ammo bandanas for dogs.

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IN THE MOOD FOR...

Skeletons

From bony heroes to fleshless monsters, they won't stay in the closet forever

1 GRIM FANDANGO

Skeletons aren't known for their brains, but Manny Calavera will need some to get through LucasArts' classic point'n'click adventure. Fortunately, Manny is nothing if not versatile, shifting roles from travel agent to night club manager to ship's captain in an effort to outsmart a ring of racketeers.

2 MORTAL KOMBAT

He may not look like one, what with his bronzed biceps, but Mortal Kombat's Scorpion is a reminder that we're all skeletons deep down. The resurrected ninja's killer party piece is to whip off his mask, along with his face and scalp, baring his shiny skull, from which he breathes fire.

3 DARKSIDERS II

Death isn't in his typical guise here, with a strapping bod and even a decent head of hair, but the skull face gives him away. In this sequel, the most infamous of the four horsemen of the apocalypse goes solo, working to reverse humanity's annihilation, of all things. Well, business must be slow without us.

4 DARK SOULS

It's not unusual for a fantasy RPG to feature the skinless undead, but Dark Souls goes further than most as you descend into its catacombs and beyond. Giant skellies are joined by their monstrous pets, bone towers, and bonewheel skeletons, then finally their boss, Gravelord Nito, a walking mound of leftovers from a Viking feast.

5 SKUL: THE HERO SLAYER

Even if you're made of nothing but bones, there are ways to take advantage of the situation. In roguelike Skul the skeletal protagonist responds to his lack of connective tissue by regularly swapping heads, each new noggin bestowing different powers and fighting styles.

6 UNDERTALE

Two skeleton brothers feature in this indie RPG. If you treat them kindly, they'll become your pals, though Papyrus is meant to be trying to capture you, so you will have to fight him first. Sans is more easygoing, but nonetheless shouldn't be crossed.

7 HAVE A NICE DEATH

Another outing for the Grim Reaper, this time trying to scythe his way out of a backlog of paperwork. With his minions reaping too many souls, there's too much admin in the underworld, so he decides to set them straight. Cue a hack-and-slash platformer with roguelike elements like... permadeath.

8 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

Fane is a companion who's more than meets the eye. Not that he can meet the eye in public, since his bony visage tends to provoke negative reactions. Best keep his skull covered, then, at least until you can reclaim his lost shapeshifting mask.

9 MEDIEVIL

Sir Daniel Fortesque aspired to be a heroic knight, and being dead hasn't changed his mind. Looking the worse for wear, even by skeleton standards, he nonetheless regards his resurrection as a second chance, busting through an army of walking dead with swords, bows, and, if necessary, his own arm.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Castlevania: Symphony Of The Night
Skeletons in Dracula's abode come in several flavours, including blood skeletons that spring back to life.

Skully
Not actually the full skeleton, this reanimated head bone gets around either by rolling or by forming a body out of magic clay.

Sea Of Thieves
The bony buccaneers guarding treasure in this pirate-'em-up don't stay down when shot. We learned that the hard way...

Did we miss your best bony blighter? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at **twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag**

4

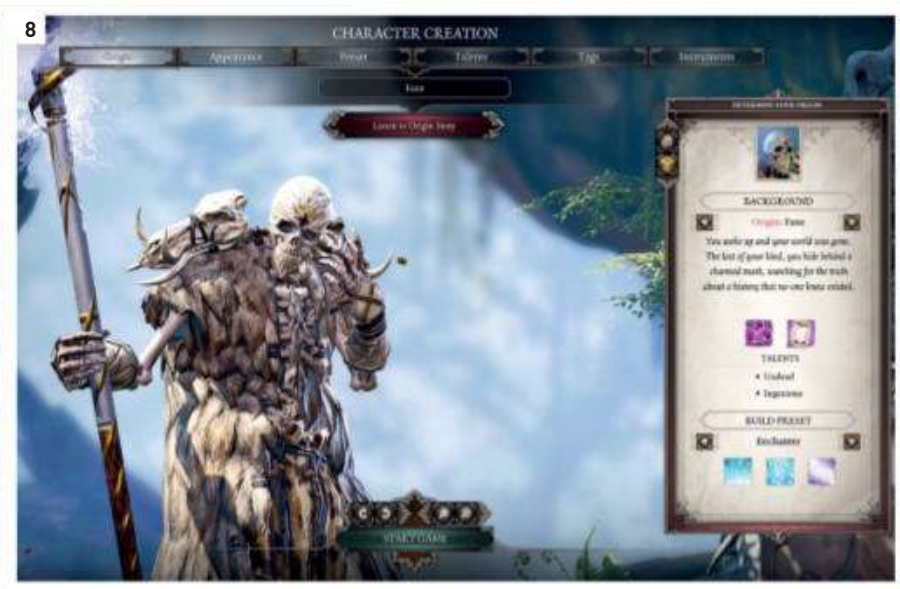
5

6

7

"THE GRIM REAPER'S TRYING TO SCYTHE HIS WAY OUT OF A BACKLOG OF PAPERWORK."
INSIDER

8


CHARACTER CREATION
Appearance
Talents
Tags
Instruments
Background
Talents
Unlocked
Ingenious
Build Preset
Enchanter

9

"This is one Long Road GTA fans are ready to turn onto."

OPINION

"VIDEOGAMES SHOULD EXPLORE ENGAGING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS."

Grand Theft Auto VI's romantic story arc promises to steal our hearts

WRITER BIO
Laura Francis likes to spend her free time living off a steady diet of romance novels and loves to pick every romance option in games.

So, it's been a few months since the neon-drenched trailer for the GTA VI dropped and there's a lot to look forward to. Amid all the chaotic Sunshine State shenanigans that are being depicted in the trailer, the dynamic between the two characters, Lucia and Jason, will most likely be integral to the plot of the game.

From the trailer it seems pretty evident that the two are romantically involved and that love will take narrative centrality – in case you need more convincing that this looks like being a criminally passionate game, the song Love Is A Long Road by Tom Petty is playing throughout the trailer. We'll be in for a ride. And if the jump in streams for the song is any indication, this is one highway fans are ready to turn onto.

The criminal duo give some serious Bonnie and Clyde, True Romance, and Natural Born Killers vibes. If there's one source Rockstar isn't afraid to draw upon, it's cinematic hits, so it'll be interesting to see what the game will crib from when we get to honeymoon in Vice City next year.

From what we know, the relationship seems to be a far cry from the infamous GTA: San Andreas 'Hot Coffee' minigame that was relegated to cut content in the source code. Instead, this love story seems much more complex and fully featured. It seems we'll be diving deep into properly developed romance with some genuinely mature writing. It just goes to show that gaming deserves to have more swoon-worthy romantic storytelling in a way that goes beyond minor sub-plots or niche genres like dating sims. We're talking about relationship development that feels organic and heartfelt, sizzling chemistry, grounded dialogue, and well-rounded, compelling characters so loved by players that they want to engage with them romantically. Combine that with exciting gameplay for a unique experience, pushing the boundaries of interactive storytelling and it is a sign of medium-pushing narrative design.

Going on a crime spree together is one way to support your partner; we'd prefer a nice back rub.

PLAYING FOR LOVE

Off the console, romance is doing better than ever, with the genre seeing a surge of popularity in the book world lately (thanks in part to social media bringing communities together). There's no reason games can't get in on the action, exploring romantic relationships with diverse characters in more depth. Relationship building has been an integral part of many RPGs, such as The Witcher, Mass Effect, and Baldur's Gate 3. Admittedly results have been mixed, but it all goes to show that making those connections is important for a great many players. The Last Of Us: Left Behind is one of Naughty Dog's strongest tales to date, thanks largely to the strength of Ellie and Riley's queer relationship.

The award-winning It Takes Two snagged several awards back in 2021 for going beyond just romance and exploring actual long-term relationship dynamics (and how to mend rifts), marrying mature human storytelling with fun co-op platforming. There's myriad relationships in the real world, and it's time gaming celebrated that beyond scoring relationship points through simple gift-giving. These stories deserve to be told for their own sakes.

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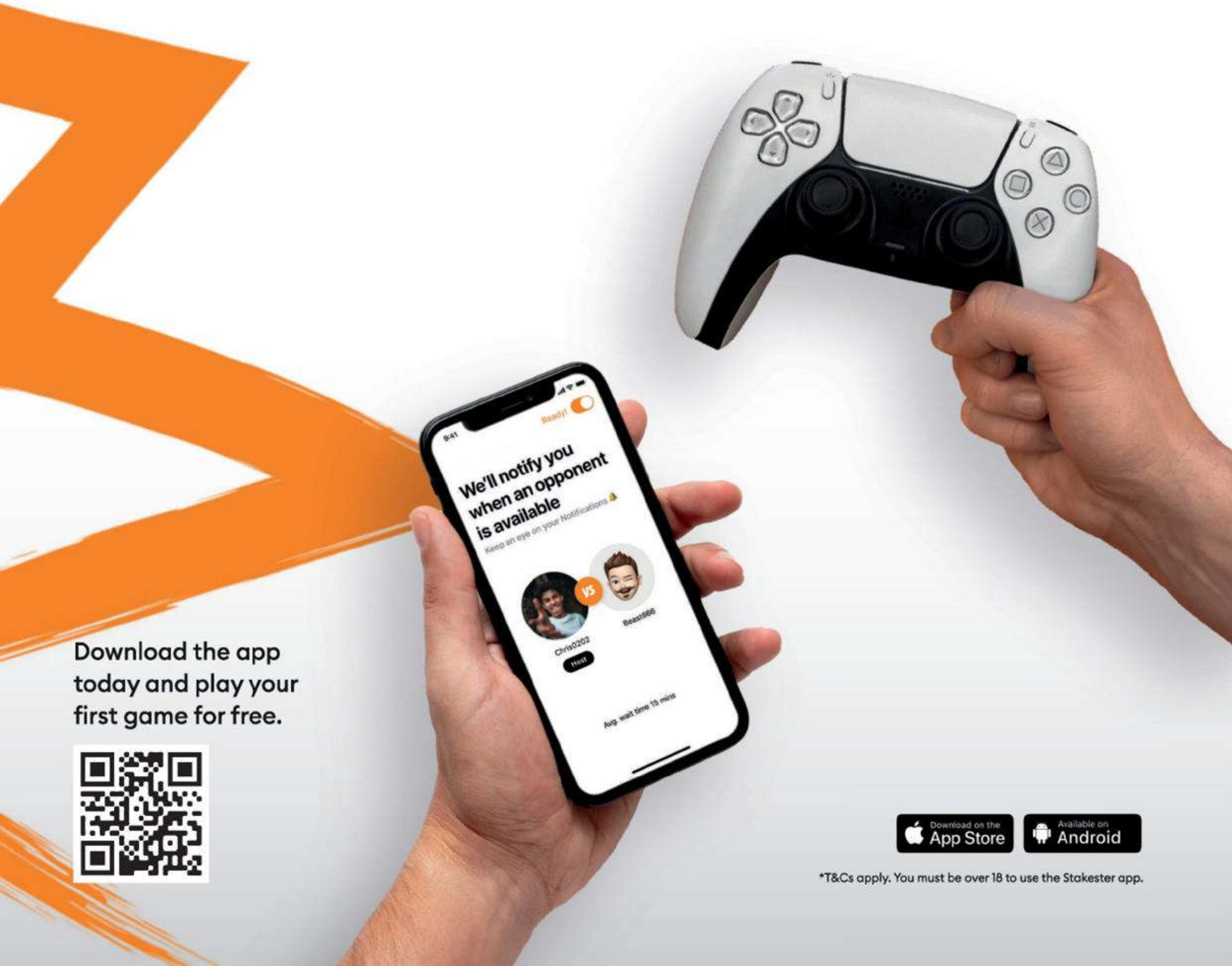

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> The approach is ultimately not a unified one across gaming.

OPINION

"I'M ARACHNOPHOBIC, BUT CAN'T USE ARACHNOPHOBIA MODES IN GAMES (YET)."

These modes will take time to finesse into something that helps players

WRITER BIO
Fantasy fan Emma Withington has been confronting videogame spiders for three decades, with no end in sight.

Giant spiders are an excessively used trope within fantasy. In fact, they're so intrinsically linked to the genre that if your sprawling world doesn't contain eight-legged terrors it's borderline suspect. My arachnid archnemesis features in Bloodborne. Yes, that one. The 'garden variety' giant that would incapacitate me in reality – I'd be pointing, yelling, and ordering my long-suffering partner to kill it.

With this in mind, why am I not yet comfortable with arachnophobia modes that should ease my suffering? First off, anything that tries to make games more accessible can only be a good thing, especially when there are people who are actively unable to play a game with an arachnid in it, regardless of how much screen time it gets.

The idea of an arachnophobia mode is still fairly recent. Kill It With Fire, Star Wars Jedi: Survivor, and the inbound Xbox hit Grounded are a few games that aim to make their arachnids easier to deal with. However, from what I've seen of these modes across gaming, the approach is ultimately not a unified one, and nailing down what will be less likely to trigger a phobia is challenging to get right. For me, just the simple knowledge that the blob in front of me is, in fact, a heckin' big spider is harder to deal with than facing it head-on. It's also not just the model – it's the sounds, movement, environment. The whole creepy-crawly shebang.

Like the Addams Family's Thing crossed with Shelob, Fingercreepers are nightmare fuel.

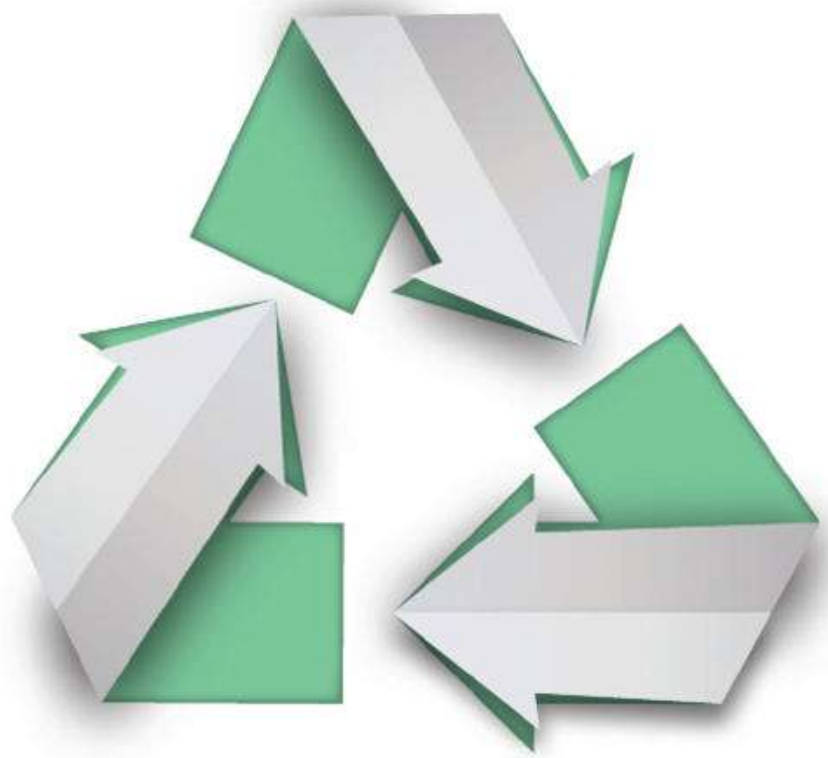
SPIDER SENSE

Take Elden Ring. It technically has an 'arachnophobia mode' to deal with its Fingercreeper enemies, which are giant, spider-like hands. Sadly, these hands still elicit fear, due to their behaviour. The mind will equate it to the thing you are afraid of, regardless of its appearance. That aside, Elden Ring has a massive world, and the fact that this kind of enemy is limited shows that you can make a fantasy epic without the classic arachnid experience.

I also appreciated that I could navigate around my Mensis nemesis in Bloodborne, though you still have some 'smaller' spiders to deal with and Rom The Vacuous Spider remains unavoidable. This got me thinking about player choice and whether taking arachnids off the critical path would help tackle the phobia? A recent example of this is in Baldur's Gate 3 and the Whispering Depths route to the Underdark, which is entirely optional. It is connected to the Necromancy Of Thay side-quest – but you can cut and run before encountering the teleporting horrors within. However, if you're like me and are a completionist, you'll push through while feeling on edge. But not everyone can manage that.

Finding a solution that doesn't compromise anyone's experience is a huge task and will depend on the game's theme; spiders are a given in Kill It With Fire and Grounded, but not always necessary within fantasy. Taking arachnids off the critical path, better signposting, and exploring new enemy types could be a solid step forward.

For me knowledge is key. I like to know what I'm dealing with, so I can plan my strategy around staying as far away as possible. But maybe it's also time to dethrone spiders as the king of fantasy beasts?



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Previews

"THE HEROES LOOK EXTRA SHINY."

032 MultiVersus

034 Kunitsu-Gami: Path Of The Goddess

Nifty footwork ensures spiritual success

HIGHLIGHTS

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"SYSTEM SHOCK DOESN'T NEED TO CHEAT TO GET UNDER YOUR SKIN."

Welcome to Citadel Station, your nightmarish home away from home. Try not to let the locals stuff you full of cables and microchips.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 20 SEP / **PUB** PRIME MATTER
DEV NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS / **PLAYERS** 1

System Shock

Hunt: SHODAN

Nightdive Studios' swanky, ground-up remake of 1994's genre-launching classic System Shock is finally heading to PlayStation – which should make you very excited if you have any interest in crawling through vents or bonking cyborg mutants on the head with blunt objects. Which, let's face it, as a PLAY reader, is pretty much a given.

System Shock casts you as a nameless hacker, blackmailed with the threat of prison by a megacorp executive into the incredibly sensible act of disengaging the ethical safety locks of SHODAN – the artificial intelligence governing the corporation's space station dedicated to all kinds of shady biological and technological research. Believe it or not, things go very wrong very quickly and you awaken on the medical level some time later to discover that SHODAN has declared herself a machine god and reduced most of the station's inhabitants to gibbering cyber-horrors.

FACTRICK

1. SLO DAN

The game has been in and out of development for *eight years*, and was crowdfunded in its early days.

2. BLUDGEON OPTIONS

There's both a lead pipe and a monkey wrench on offer, so you've always got a tool to suit your mood.

3. FUTURE SHOCK

The studio is hard at work on an enhanced version of survival horror sequel System Shock 2.

CYBER SNOOPER

From there matters are left more or less up to you to figure out. You'll be carrying out a lot of the activities beloved by the developers of PC immersive sims in the '90s and '00s: snooping through people's private emails for locker and door codes; constantly managing your inventory of various types of grenades; and sneaking up behind robots to drop big mines in their paths. You'll also occasionally hop into cyberspace, turning the game into a simplistic shoot-'em-up that frankly always lasts a little longer than it should.

As you pick your way through the ruined, labyrinthine levels of Citadel Station you'll piece together the details of what went down, while also working out how to fix your colossal mistake. As we creep through the mutant-haunted corridors of the opening medical level, it becomes clear that Nightdive Studios is pulling off something few devs manage when it comes to remakes – tricking your brain into believing this is what one of your favourite games always looked like. Of course, it never looked like this. The original System Shock is 30 years old, built for PC systems that could barely handle the concept of 3D space.

Here, all the possibilities of modern technology are on display, but they're being used to render details that perfectly fit the overall vibe and aesthetics of the original game. The big, colourful squares that line 1994's walls have become industrial cladding. The screens of blinking lights and indiscernible shapes that clutter every workspace have become chunky CRT displays with curved, scratched screens displaying technical jargon in searing neon. It all still feels like the future, as envisioned by a '90s nerd who's completely enraptured by the utilitarian sci-fi designs of Alien and Blade Runner.

TRACK RECORD Nightdive Studios has made a name for itself in recent years with stellar ports and remasters of classic PC games, including the recent remaster of Star Wars: Dark Forces (reviewed last issue).

1

This permeates everything. The physical storage medium used throughout Citadel Station is still the humble USB stick, rendered in all its obsolete glory every time you find one and pop it into a port on your cyberglove. Every weapon and piece of technology looks like it was cobbled together from spare parts for a low-budget science fiction movie – and we mean that as the highest possible compliment. The guns are all filthy and industrial, covered in grease and wear; firing off a round is always loud and terrifying. Ear-splitting snaps make you wonder if you've just broken something as a red-hot incendiary round shreds a shambling mechanical zombie to seared pieces.

NEW TERRORTORY

Nightdive's ability to retain so much of the original game's bright colours while maintaining a constant atmosphere of dread is really remarkable. So many of the cheaper tricks of modern horror games (jump scares, constant darkness) are absent here. System Shock doesn't need to cheat to get under your skin. So much of the fear comes from being in an unknown space filled with unknown threats that the blank map you start with in each new area can make exploring feel daunting. Your first encounter with each new enemy is always fraught. You usually hear something before seeing it, catching something muttering to itself from around a corner or behind a door. Sometimes you'll glimpse something far too big and covered in far too many guns shambling across the end of a hallway you're working your way down.

It can be strangely therapeutic to slowly overcome all of this, though, to watch your automap sketch out every nook and cranny, to clear out each room in the most efficient manner you can, in the process feeling yourself grow from a panicky idiot into an incredibly organised viscera janitor as you figure out the best ways to handle each threat.

This densely atmospheric and stylish remake could be the definitive way to experience one of the most important videogames ever made – apparently losing nothing that made the original what it was while building on it in ways that feel completely natural.

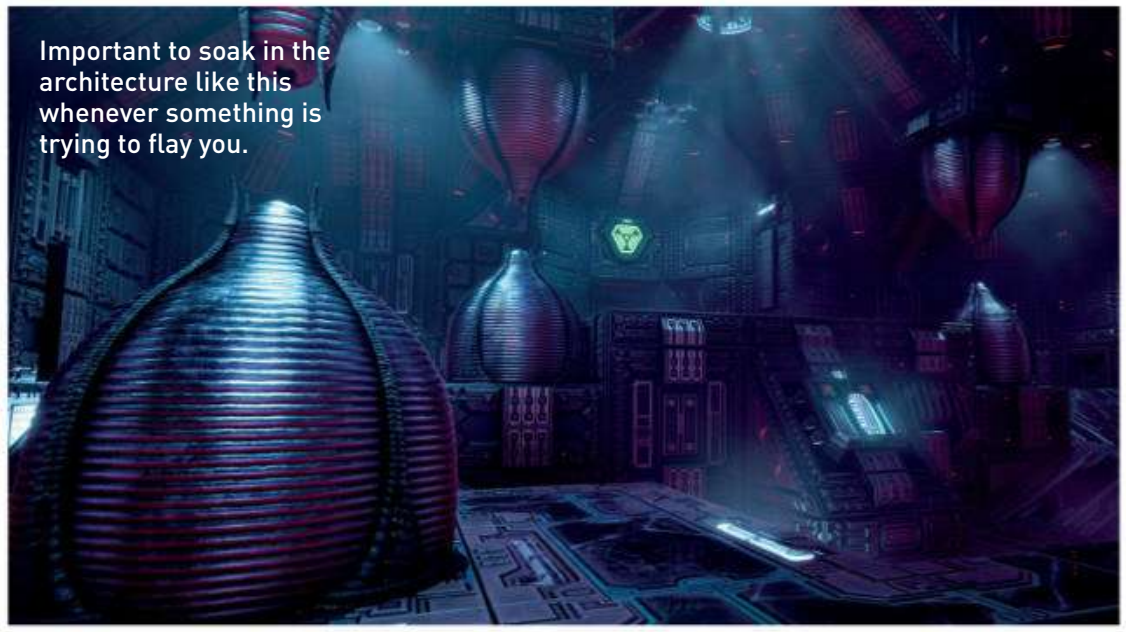
IMPRESSIONS

Even if you have no interest in the original game's historical significance, the remake of System Shock is likely to be one of the best horror games released for PlayStation this year.

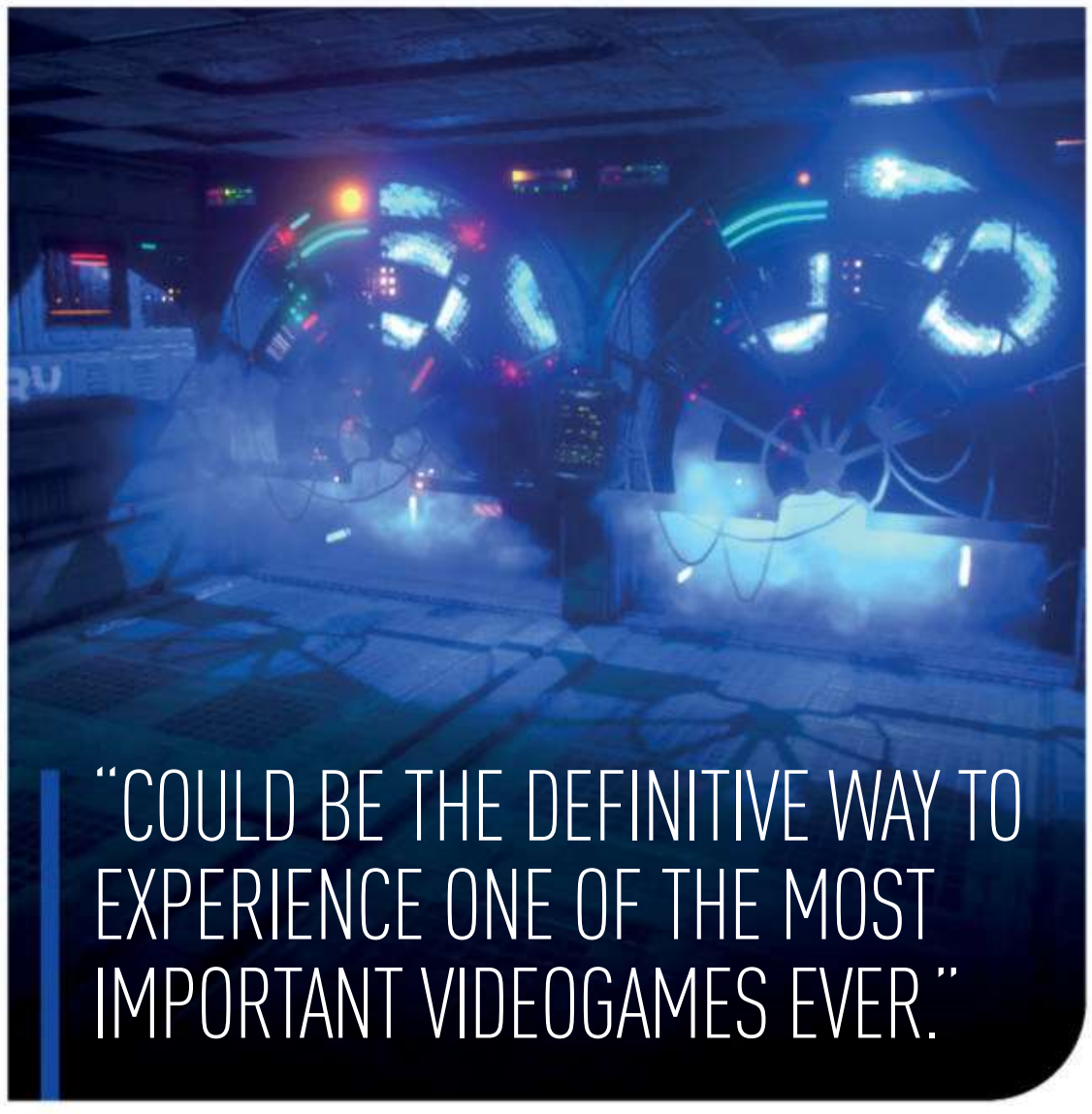
2

3

1 What are the square protrusions on the walls for? We don't know but they look very futuristic. 2 System Shock has always been noted for its gore, and the station has more offal on display than a butcher's window, now in extra-clear detail. 3 All in all, the game's an important lesson in making sure your AI doesn't have a KILL EVERYONE toggle switch. 4 We hope you enjoy Inventory Jenga, because you're going to be playing it.



Important to soak in the architecture like this whenever something is trying to flay you.



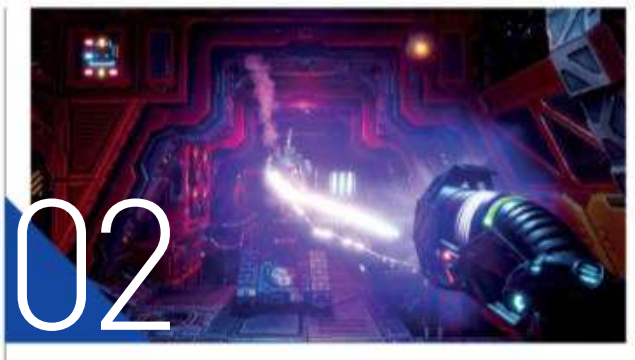
"COULD BE THE DEFINITIVE WAY TO EXPERIENCE ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT VIDEOGAMES EVER."

Cyber safari

How to handle some of the locals

01

Your garden-variety cyborg is noisy and easy to spot, and will usually get the message ('please die') after a single quick bullet to the brainpan.



02

A roaming laser turret doesn't have much in terms of squishy bits to whittle away, so save your bullets and stay behind it while blasting it with electricty.

03

The hulking maintenance robots are built to last, so this is the special occasion you've been saving all those explosives and armour-piercing rounds for.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 8 MAY / **PUB** 11 BIT STUDIOS / **DEV** ODD METER / **PLAYERS** 1

Indika

The devil on your shoulder

Seeing a studio take risks always gives us a buzz, and Odd Meter's mind-bending game Indika makes one hell of a first impression. It tells the tale of a nun who leaves her monotonous life in a convent to travel across 19th-century Russia, but here's the kicker: her travelling companion is the devil, leading to a fierce tension between religion, reality, and authority.

This is a story-driven adventure in a distorted world, and one that Odd Meter is allowing us to view through an aggressively stylish lens. As headstrong young nun Indika leaves the safe walls of her convent for a greater purpose, the devil seems to be living in her head rent-free, whispering comments to her as she makes her way through Russia's industrial wastelands.

Our demo takes place a little way into the game, as when we first meet Indika she's already left the monastery and is travelling with a convict named Ilya. It's not clear how the unlikely pair ended up as travel buddies, but even though Ilya says that Indika is his hostage, their back and forth suggests something different. Ilya is badly wounded and, out of desperation, is relying on Indika to help him cross the frozen landscape. It's a strange match-up, particularly when you find out that Ilya is a devout devotee of God and is vocal about his belief that he is God's chosen one. This dynamic – a criminal who hears the voice of God and a nun who hears the voice of the devil – exemplifies Odd Meter's brand of dark humour and irony.

The two arrive at an abandoned village, the pathway blocked by a large, industrial cart. Exploration is a familiar blend of poking around your surroundings plus some light environmental puzzle-solving. You'll be searching for keys, moving ladders, pushing trolleys, picking up objects – nothing too out of the ordinary. A small but welcome detail is that sometimes the third-person perspective is slightly warped and only noticeable when Indika moves in certain directions. It's like you're looking through a fish-eye lens, and it makes this strange world feel slightly off-kilter.

FACTRICK

1. BODY OF WORK

Publisher 11 Bit Studios is the creator of This War Of Mine, Frostpunk, and upcoming sci-fi tale The Alters.

2. PARALLEL WORLDS

The game's developer, Odd Meter, describes Indika's setting as a "grotesque alternative Russia".

3. HELPING HAND

Part of the revenue from Indika will be donated to help children affected by the war in Ukraine, says 11 Bit.

DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

Up to this point Indika feels very in line with what we've seen in games before, but it doesn't take long for the weirdness to start seeping through. You can interact with religious items as you're looking around – examine prayer beads, read an excerpt from a book about saints, and light a candle at a small altar, for example. When you perform these actions, you score points. Earn enough and you're able to level up… something? It's unclear right now what you're levelling up (potentially your devotion to God?), and it feels incredibly out of place within Indika's photorealistic world. This stylistic choice feels deliberate, and is almost guaranteed to polarise players, but it's in keeping with Odd Meter's sense of humour. Each burst of golden pixellated confetti feels like an evil chuckle.

Indika really starts to go off the rails when our devilish friend takes centre stage. The devil doesn't chatter constantly with Indika, but instead whispers to her at quieter moments. One such time is when she has to decide whether to open a sealed letter she was given to deliver, to see if it's important enough to follow through. After being prompted by the devil, she decides to open it, and as she rips open the envelope the screen explodes with activity. The ceiling above suddenly rips open to reveal a blood-red sky, electronic dubstep starts to pound, and the devil's once-sly voice is now a booming cackle that reverberates off the walls. It's incredibly gripping, totally unconventional, and definitely the best part of our preview.

> "EACH BURST OF GOLDEN PIXELLATED CONFETTI FEELS LIKE AN EVIL CHUCKLE."

Indika's stylistic choices feel wildly refreshing, but other, more conventional, elements are frustrating. The more action-orientated sequences (the end of the demo sees us running away from a big black dog-wolf thing, for example) are clumsy and feel like a step away from the more exciting art-house elements towards a more typical third-person adventure game.

IMPRESSIONS

Odd Meter has taken risks with Indika's creative direction and the result is a stylish third-person adventure that feels abrasive and refreshing. We hope it can maintain that momentum throughout.

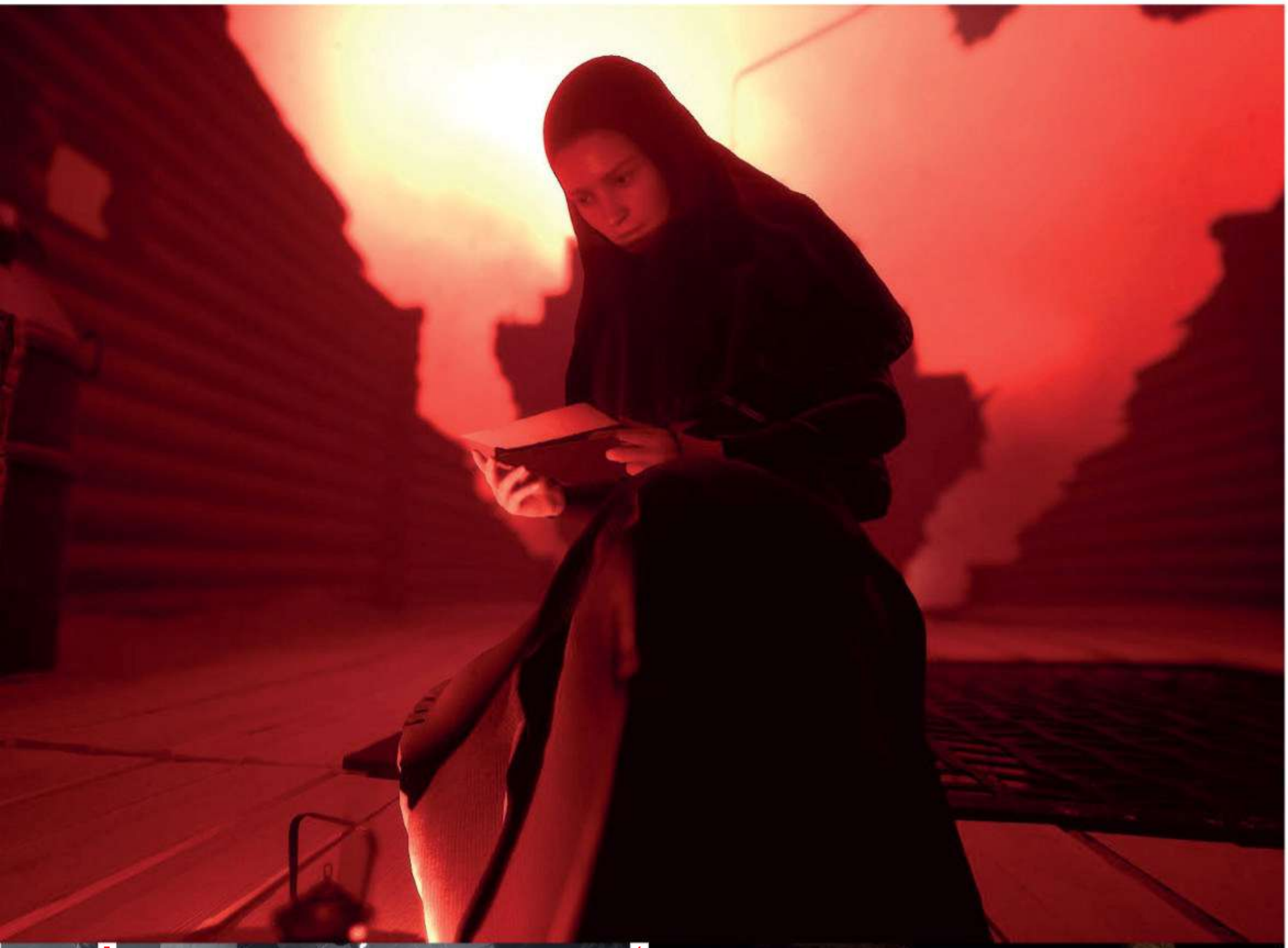
4 A bit of advice: don't read other people's mail. 5 The abandoned, partly frozen paint factory feels particularly haunted. A place once bustling, now frozen forever in time. 6 There's a minimal skill tree with upgrades labelled Grief, Guilt, Regret, and Repentance, and choosing them will multiply your 'score' in different ways.

TRACK RECORD The working partnership between Russian studio Odd Meter and Polish publisher 11 Bit Studios was "long underway" when Russia's invasion of Ukraine began. Odd Meter's 16-person team relocated and now works from Kazakhstan.

2

3

1 It's implied that there's a spark between Indika and Ilya, but we hope it doesn't happen, honestly. 2 Indika's hyper-realistic visual style makes those strange fish-eye lens moments feel more bizarre. 3 The devil has a particularly nasty voice, one that's skilfully simultaneously velvety and venomous.



5

6

This fighter throws down with slapstick, cartoony panache, keeping 'sticking 'em with the pointy end' strictly PG-rated.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 28 MAY / **PUB** WARNER BROS GAMES / **DEV** PLAYER FIRST GAMES / **PLAYERS** ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

MultiVersus

Welcome to the slam

Too often live service games explode onto the stage only to evaporate from the scene for good maybe a year later – but this platform fighter is about to break that pattern. After debuting in July 2022 and spending two seasons in open beta, this free-to-play free-for-all disappeared in a cartoony puff of smoke last summer. However, it's been given a serious technical makeover, and will be jumping back into the ring.

In case you're blinking in the dark on this one, MultiVersus pits characters from many different universes owned by Warner Brothers against each other; if you want to settle once and for all which DC superhero is strong enough to take on Adventure Time's magical yellow Jake The Dog or you've always had the oddly specific desire to see Game Of Thrones' Arya Stark shank Scooby Doo's beardy bestie Shaggy, MultiVersus has you covered.

There's a slapstick, suitably Looney Tunes aspect to bouts (and coincidentally both Bugs Bunny and Marvin The Martian also feature on the roster). Fighters leap around multilevel 2-and-a-bit-D stages, attempting to avoid damage while simultaneously punting the opposition into the void.

READY PLAYER STUN

Over the last year, the team at Player First Games have moved the game into Unreal Engine 5 to ensure all the heroes and villains look extra-shiny. In addition to giving the game a visual polish, the team have largely rebuilt it to incorporate a netcode for super-responsive smackdowns featuring fresh character-specific moves and mechanics. A PvE mode will also be joining the fold, bolstering the existing, already decent, selection of competitive and co-operative game modes.

> "A PVE MODE WILL BOLSTER THE EXISTING SET OF GAME MODES."

Biting the dust only to re-emerge for a glitzy comeback tour ain't nothing. However, only time will tell whether this fighter has what it takes to endure on the live service scene or simply ends up getting knocked out in round one.

IMPRESSIONS

Returning from the live service grave is no mean feat. We're keen to see if this resurrected fighter can stick the landing.

Settle it once and for all! Who would win: Superman or Ultra Instinct Shaggy?

ON THE HORIZON

The next six months, mapped out

02 months

FINAL FANTASY XIV: DAWNTRAIL
A fight over a throne, art attacks, and buff catwomen: it's got it all.
FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA 2 JUL / **PUB** SQUARE ENIX

04 months

EARTH DEFENSE FORCE: WORLD BROTHERS 2
When alien bugs descend, it's up to you to blitz their blocks in this voxel-based third-person shooter.
FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 26 SEP / **PUB** D3 PUBLISHER

06 months

YS X: NORDICS
Action RPG featuring a combat system that sees you dual-wielding heroes.
FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA AUTUMN 2024
PUB NIS AMERICA

Cute enemy designs won't stop us from devastating hundreds of them.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** SQUARE ENIX / **DEV** OUKA STUDIOS / **PLAYERS** 1

Visions Of Mana

Tree-t yourself to this mana-fold return

Once one of Square Enix's core RPGs, this series has been all but on ice for 17 years. Mobile releases, spinoffs, and remakes are all that have been released since PS2's Dawn Of Mana. Now it's back, and not missing a beat – it feels of a piece with the latest offerings from cousins Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest.

Which isn't to say it doesn't feel more modest. Few games will ever have the same budget as Final Fantasy VII Rebirth. But Visions Of Mana feels immediately good in the hands. Starting in a large and colourful open field, we run around, double-jumping, mounting a wolf-thing called Pikul, finding chests, and taking on side-quests.

"FEELS OF A PIECE WITH THE LATEST FINAL FANTASY AND DRAGON QUEST."

VESSEL METTLE

There's a lot to stumble upon in the open areas, though many items are hidden behind the use of vessels. These elemental powers can, for instance, reverse time on an opened treasure chest to restore its contents for you to collect, or allow you to use wind to super-jump up a cliff you couldn't reach otherwise. They're somewhat prescriptive moments, but add character to the world.

Vessels are more creative in battle, where they don't only give the party member equipped with them an extra move on a cooldown (like creating a time-stopping bubble or summoning a whirlwind), but completely change their class. In a neat twist, that class depends on who is taking on the mantle. The Luna Globe, for instance, can upgrade main hero Val into a big, shield-wielding Aegis, but in the hands of the sassier Morley it unlocks the quick-footed, twin-blade-wielding Nightblade. In scraps you can take control of any of your party members using a system not unlike FFVII Rebirth's, pressing on the D-pad to begin whacking as someone else (or pausing to use magic or items). It's snappy, and satisfying to pull off combo chains, especially against big bosses with distinct weak points. Man, uh, yes please.

IMPRESSIONS

We're ready to be whisked away on this colourful adventure promising excellent party pals and clicky combat.

1 More linear, dungeon-like areas feature, but feel no less vibrant than the wide-open locations. 2 The world is big, but furry pal Pikul makes moving through it a lot faster.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024
PUB CAPCOM / **DEV** CAPCOM / **PLAYERS** 1

Kunitsu-Gami: Path Of The Goddess

Not quite a walk in the park

Fancy strategy with a twist? How about a game featuring the one-two step of parading demons meeting crowd control in the form of twirling, dancing blade strikes? Many of the genre staples are here (protect your special unit, build and fortify your base, mop up enemies) but all set within a frame drawing heavily upon Japan's indigenous religion, Shinto, with the developers even going so far as to call this a "kagura action strategy game."

FACTRICK

1. IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Villagers can take on roles beyond building and fighting; ascetics use incantations to restrain the Seethe.

2. SETTING BOUNDARIES

Torii gates are found at the entrance of Shinto shrines, at the boundary between mundane and sacred spaces.

3. MOON PIE

Kunitsu-Gami: Path Of The Goddess is being developed using Capcom's RE Engine, first used on Resi VII.

So, what is kagura? In the simplest of terms it is a ceremonial dance that, as a living folk tradition, can take many forms – in Kunitsu-Gami's case, that's a purifying procession led by the Maiden, Yoshiro.

You play as Soh, Yoshiro's constant companion, wielding both sword and ceremonial wands in the name of spiritual protection. By whirling the paper streamers of your wand around, you swab a path forward for Yoshiro, with every step cleaning up the defilement of Mount Kafuku. Your aim is to assist Yoshiro in reaching her destination – often a torii gate in need of ritual purification – while avoiding getting nibbled on by mythological fiends known here as the Seethe.

DANCE DANCE PURIFICATION

The success (or failure) of this deceptively short walk rests on how you prepared before night fell. During the day you'll need to scrub away the defilement, a shady

TRACK RECORD Two obvious points of comparison from Capcom's past spring to mind: the ink-washed world of 2007's Okami, and the mythic sword fights throughout the Onimusha series (which debuted in 2001).

Seeing you fighting fiends by moonlight and protecting Yoshiro during the day, this real-time strategy game cuts a compelling rug.

overgrowth that physically shrouds both people and structures. You can turn these to your cause once you've cleaned house. Villagers you free can be given a range of roles, from fortifying your position through building protective architecture to taking on the demonic hordes that fall over themselves to escape through the corrupted torii gate at night. This dynamic day/night cycle ensures you're never standing still.

In addition to making strategic decisions around the clock, you take to the front line in person at night. Besides directing combat units, you can bestow the Maiden with protective buffs and duel with the Big Bads that would stop her in her tracks. On top of a strong visual direction that borrows from Japanese woodblock prints, the gnarly monster designs for these beasties is a particular treat. As Kunitsu-Gami finds its footing, we can't tear our eyes away.

"A STRONG VISUAL DIRECTION THAT BORROWS FROM JAPANESE PRINTS."

IMPRESSIONS

This strategy-meets-real-time-action title puts its best foot forward, and does so in style. Hitting the dancefloor amid waves of gnarly-looking mythical creatures, we couldn't be happier.

"IF YOU FAIL, YOU LOSE EVERYTHING. YOU LOSE YOUR WEAPONS, YOUR MECH, *EVERYTHING*."

Visually Synduality's best when it leans into being colourful and surreal, sometimes reminding us of mindbendy movie Annihilation. Er, but jollier.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** BANDAI NAMCO
DEV GAME STUDIO INC / **PLAYERS** MULTI

Synduality: Echo Of Ada

Nonsensical name, enjoyable game

Usually we here at PLAY love rain. When the sky is weeping outside, we have the perfect excuse to stay inside and play Baldur's Gate 3 all day. But Synduality's toxic showers have us swearing off stupid skywater for good. What's the point of a game that puts you in a massive heavily-armed mech if you're just going to be destroyed by a light drizzle?

The mech's name should've been a red flag. We're piloting a Cradle Coffin, a moniker for a machine that feels like it's *really* tempting fate. The apocalypse happened, and the planet's surface is now more hostile to humans than a Covid strain made of wasps. There's the aforementioned killer rain, plus deadly creatures called 'Enders' prowling the abandoned cities, deserts, and lakes. Oh, and the game's a PvPvE extraction shooter, so if you meet another mech, you'd better pray they're reaching for the wave emote and not a massive shotgun.

You live below the surface and have to brave trips above ground to scavenge for resources. But if you fail, you lose everything. Your weapons, your mech, *everything*. Even Dark Souls never went as far as taking the shirt off our backs! While this is often devastating, it gives the game great tension, making up for some of its more generic elements. The Enders look like slightly flatter versions of the machine-dinos we fought in Horizon Zero Dawn. Your starting guns are fine, but nothing that'll have Armored Core worried. And the 'speed boost' is laughable, only speedy compared to the glacial trudge of your normal walking speed.

HEAVY METAL

Ah, but once you stop playing this as a power fantasy and more as a brutal survival shooter, Synduality starts to click. Juggling when to use that easily-overheated speed boost is crucial for escaping the map with your prizes. You have a 'Safety Pocket' that'll let you keep one item upon death. A brilliant idea, and it's equally inspired how vulnerable you are when you're deciding what to pocket. The rubbish jump makes sense for a lumbering machine, as does nasty fall damage. You'd better keep an eye on the map screen, too, unless you want to keep finding your limited escape routes blocked by impassible cliffs. And to top it all, the more you're carrying, the slower your movement. We've waited years for someone to be influenced by Death Stranding's best ideas and it's great to see another dev making you think twice about every clomping step.

You have to keep an eye on your health, your battery, ammunition, weapons breaking, repair kits, how far you are from an escape route, and no

FACTRICK

1. PAST LIVES

You're sometimes asked to find artefacts, like things called 'chopsticks', to learn about the world's history.

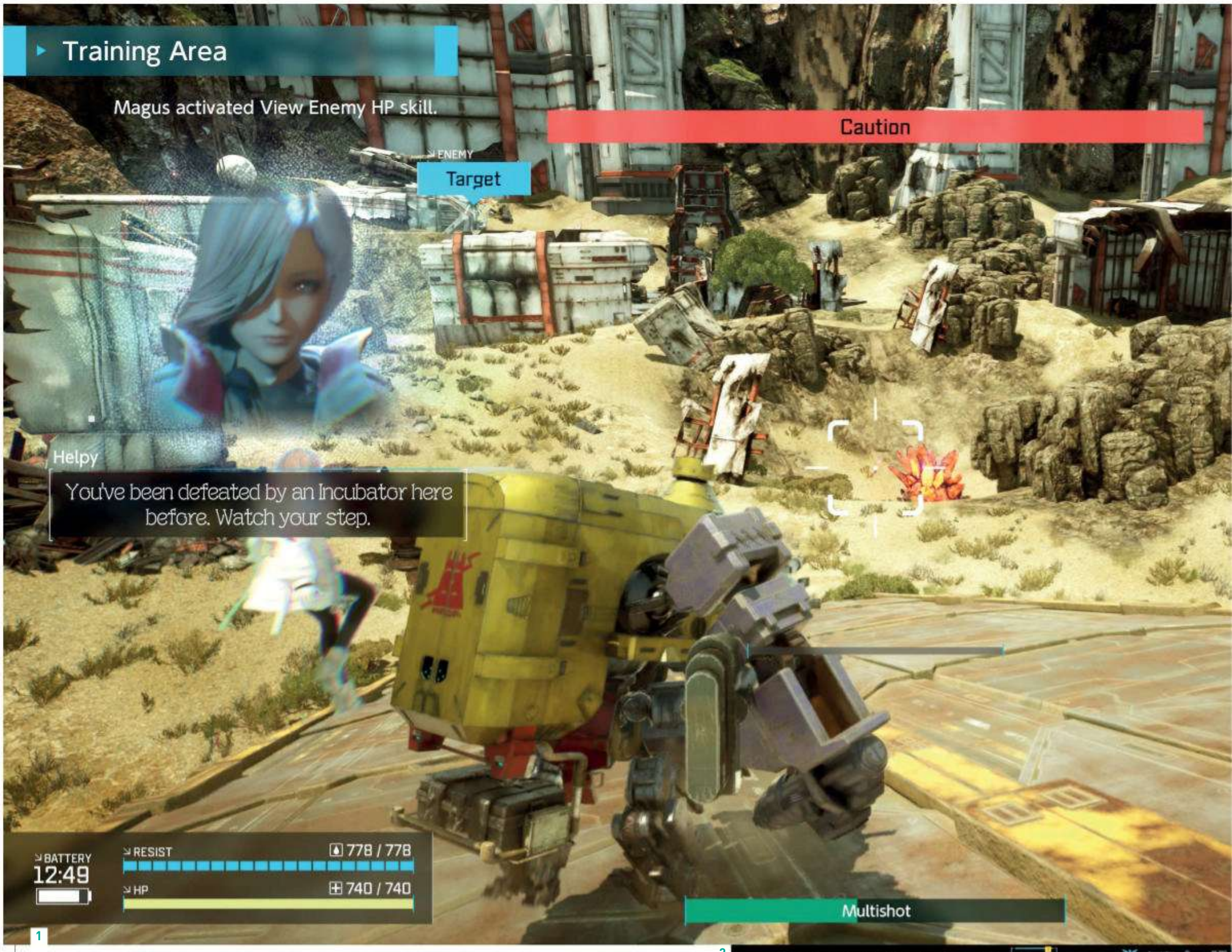
2. INSULT + INJURY

Upon failure, you get shown a screen of all the items you've lost forever. It's just bullying at this point, surely?

3. BUYER PROTECTION

You can buy insurance for your equipment. Well worth it, but how has that insurer not gone bankrupt?

TRACK RECORD Game Studio Inc, which must be the most literally named game studio in the world, is a Japanese outfit that has mainly worked on mobile titles, including for series as big as Dragon Quest.



1

» doubt several more vital things that we can't remember because we're too stressed trying to juggle all these spinning plates. This should be overwhelming. And, er, it is. But Synduality greatly rewards careful planning. As our closed beta goes on, we start spending more time stroking our chins on the Prep screen, agonising over just how many repair kits and bullets to take without weighing ourselves down. Then we start setting ourselves smaller goals, like paying a brief visit to the surface for one or two resources followed by an immediate cowardly dash home. Gradually, we start making progress.

TIME CRISIS

Sounds dull? Far from it, because leaving the map is far from straightforward. First you have to reach one of only two exit elevators. Then you have to wait the longest 30 seconds of your life for it to bother showing up. Then wait *another* 15 seconds for the elevator to pop you back down to safety. 45 seconds may not seem like a lot of time, but trust us, this wait feels as agonising as a dozen-strong queue for the bathroom after a prune-eating contest. When you and another mech are both waiting for the same elevator, knowing either one of you could suddenly decide to pull the trigger on the other, it's as tense as any game on PS5. We literally punch the air when we successfully escape with a plastic pipe that we need to redo our washroom.

No, seriously. Resources are used to upgrade your living quarters from a dilapidated dump into, well, a slightly *less* dilapidated dump (hilariously, you get before-and-after shots of the incredibly underwhelming home makeover). Naturally these upgrades also give you more resources to use out there in the death fields, including much more satisfying guns. There are plenty of nasty surprises waiting in those fields too. The desert hosts horrors worthy of Arrakis and there's a great shock lurking in the lake. Even the toxic rain storms eventually win us over, to the point that we're now crossing our fingers Bandai Namco releases the full game during the overcast season. We'd love an excuse to stay inside with this moreish mech shooter/extreme home renovator.

IMPRESSIONS

You don't lose 11 hours to a closed beta unless it's doing something right. A very promising mish-mash of smart ideas that proves there's plenty of unfulfilled potential in the extraction shooter yet.

2

3

1 Enter an area where you've perished before, and you'll be warned. It becomes a little dispiriting after you've died *everywhere*. 2 Find artefacts and you'll steadily unlock a timeline of what happened to the world. 3 The game is introduced by this talking bunny, who is then never seen again. Er, what? 4 Without wishing to spoil anything, that large purple skull icon doesn't mean 'Let's be chums!'

AO Crystals are the game's currency, and have to be s-l-o-w-l-y mined while you hope nothing hits you.

"IT'S GREAT TO SEE A DEVELOPER MAKING YOU THINK TWICE ABOUT EVERY CLOMPING STEP."

4

Humanoid helper

Meet your chatterbox companion

01

Your 'Magus' is an android who acts as your guide. They suffer from verbal diarrhoea that would have a Dragon's Dogma pawn reaching for the earplugs.

02

Sometimes you'll have to separate from your Magus to complete a mission, like this spot of fishing. Fair warning: this leaves you far more open to attack!

03

Here's our Magus enjoying a little dance in our horrible underground bunker. For a game set on a devastated world, it's enjoyably upbeat.

Asphalt: Legends Unite

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** JULY 2024 / **PUB** GAMELOFT
DEV GAMELOFT / **PLAYERS** 1-8

Quietly purring the engine, Gameloft has been making rather good arcade racers since 2004. Not heard of it during the past 20 years? That's fair enough – often relegated to portable consoles and mobiles, this is the first time the Asphalt series is lining up on PlayStation's starting grid.

Technically built on the chassis of Asphalt 9: Legends, this is a full overhaul for consoles that features crossplay across its multiplayer modes. There's plenty of solo play as well, with heaps of arcade races as you get behind the wheel of hypercars and pelt at top speed through city streets, ruined roads, jungles, and more – with a good number of ramps along the way. Thanks to its nature as an update, years of content is in the mix, meaning hundreds of missions and cars are available from the moment the flag is waved. Gearheads, start your engines.

PO'ed: Definitive Edition

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024
PUB NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS
DEV NIGHTDIVE STUDIOS, ANY CHANNEL / **PLAYERS** 1

Post office? Paid overtime? Purchase order? In the almost 20 years since this Doom-like FPS was released on PS1 we're none the wiser as to what it stands for, and that's the story we're sticking with when our mums next ask us.

What we do know is that this bizarre shooter plays out like a fever dream, making us wonder if the angry chef we play as has slipped something into our food. Having crashed on an alien planet, you use frying pans, chef's knives, drills, and an assortment of alien weapons to blast through legions of strange foes like walking bums. A jetpack introduces plenty of verticality to parts of the levels as well. We're not PO'ed at this return.

Enotria: The Last Song

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 21 AUG
PUB JYAMMA GAMES
DEV JYAMMA GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

What if the world of Dark Souls was a sunny one? And instead of drawing upon broader European mythology, it was specifically Italian? Enter Enotria, where players and enemies look like they could have stepped right out of Carnevale, and, despite areas being littered with enemies, you wouldn't mind a quick vacay there.

The outfits are important too, as our hero is the Mask Of Change. That means not just strutting your stuff, but using your ability to shift roles to your advantage as you battle through Canovaccio, a cursed eternal play that grips the world. Mega-Man-style, you're able to earn masks from enemies to take on their powers. We're looking forward to going undercover.

The Sinking City 2

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC
PUB FROGWARES / **DEV** FROGWARES
PLAYERS 1

We rather liked the first Sinking City despite its ropiness. Drawing upon its history of making Sherlock Holmes games, Frogwares merged its great mystery design with an intriguing open world and cosmic horror weirdness. And also plenty of combat.

The shooting was definitely our least favourite part of the game. So it's a mystery in and of itself that it seems to be coming to the fore in this sequel, which is being billed as a survival horror. The announcement has said very little about doing any detecting at all. But, though it might not be playing to the studio's strengths, past attempts at action definitely needed work, and that work is being done here. It's something we'll investigate as it progresses.

Fatal Fury: City Of The Wolves

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** EARLY 2025
PUB SNK / **DEV** SNK / **PLAYERS** 1

Some players may be surprised to learn that The King Of Fighters isn't SNK's main thing, but rather a crossover fighter combining combatants from multiple fighting games, including the Fatal Fury series. But it's hard to blame them, as the last FF was released in 1999 – Garou: Mark Of The Wolves (which remains one of the greatest pixel art fighters ever made).

26 years is one heck of a gap. But it's nice to see SNK making a focussed return rather than throwing everything into another massive KOF pot. In the mix so far are Rock Howard, Terry Bogard, Tizoc, Hotaru Futaba, and Preecha. Its sharp, cel-shaded visuals look good, and, importantly, the moves we've seen evoke the impact that defines classic Fatal Fury.

The Heirloom

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** OCTOBER
PUB BABUBI GAMES / **DEV** BABUBI GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Is it too early to start planning for Halloween? We know what we'll be doing: cosying up with a mug of hot chocolate and getting ready to embark on a spooky adventure based on Scottish folklore while soaking in some absolutely gorgeous hand-drawn artwork.

Channelling A Series Of Unfortunate Events, you play as Maria, who's orphaned along with her brother Jack, and sent to live in a strange ancestral lighthouse with their enigmatic and reclusive older relative. What's the relation? What's up with this lighthouse? Why would anyone live somewhere called The Forgotten Isles? We don't know, but the prospect of uncovering the secrets of Maria's family is already a thrilling one. Puzzles already look tricksy, so you might want to pack a notebook for this trip as well.

Metal: Hellsinger VR

FORMAT PSVR2 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** FUNCOM
DEV LAB42, THE OUTSIDERS / **PLAYERS** 1

There's something about playing any FPS that makes us wonder how it would feel in PSVR2, and that's especially true for one as immersive as Metal: Hellsinger, where losing yourself to its all-star soundtrack is kind of the point. Described as being developed "from the ground up", this PSVR2 version features options aplenty, from full to minimal VR control, such as aiming dual weapons independently. It's unclear if there will be an upgrade path or how it will work with already-purchased DLC.

Corpse Party II: Darkness Distortion

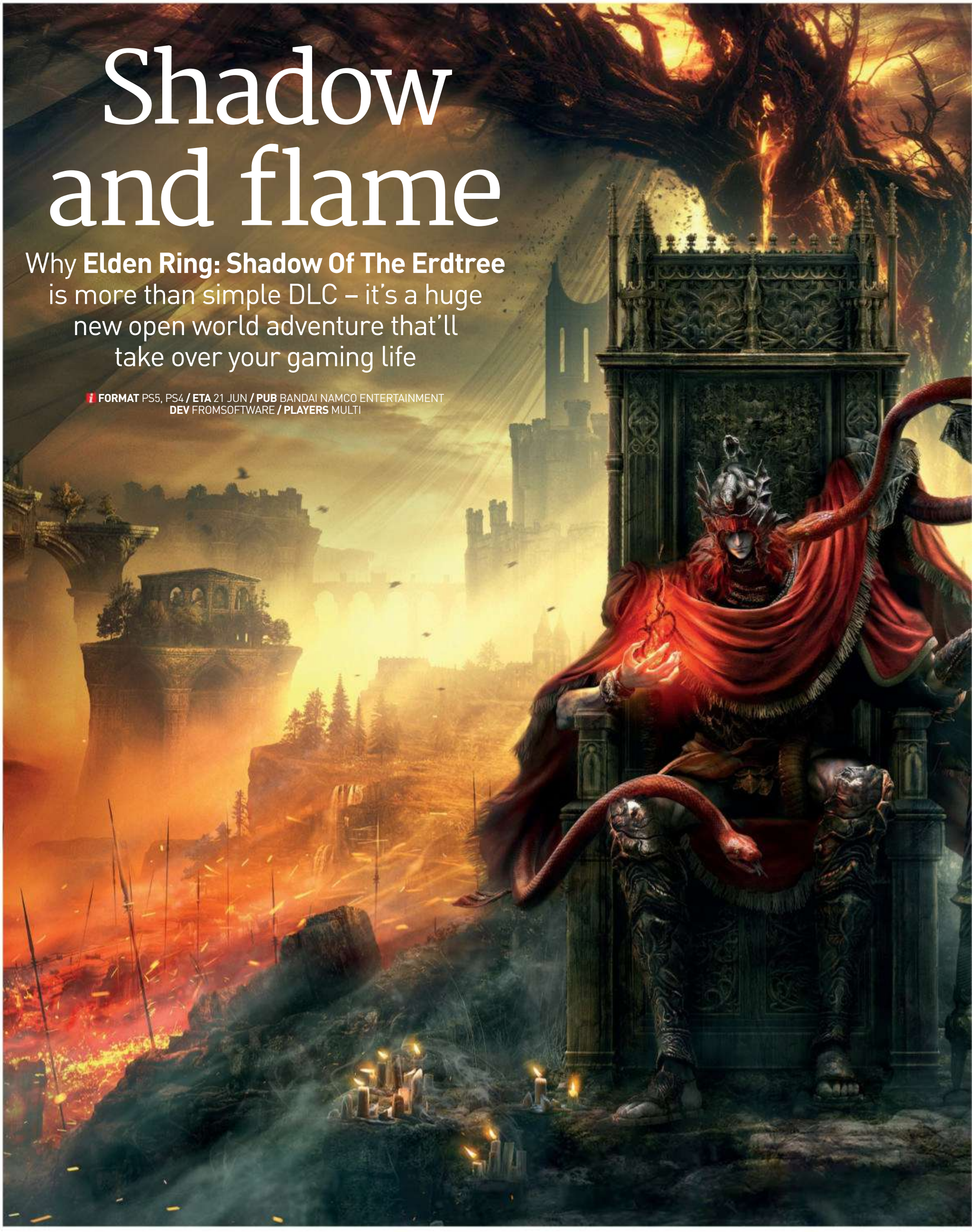
FORMAT PS4 / **ETA** AUTUMN 2024
PUB MARVELOUS EUROPE
DEV MAGES / **PLAYERS** 1

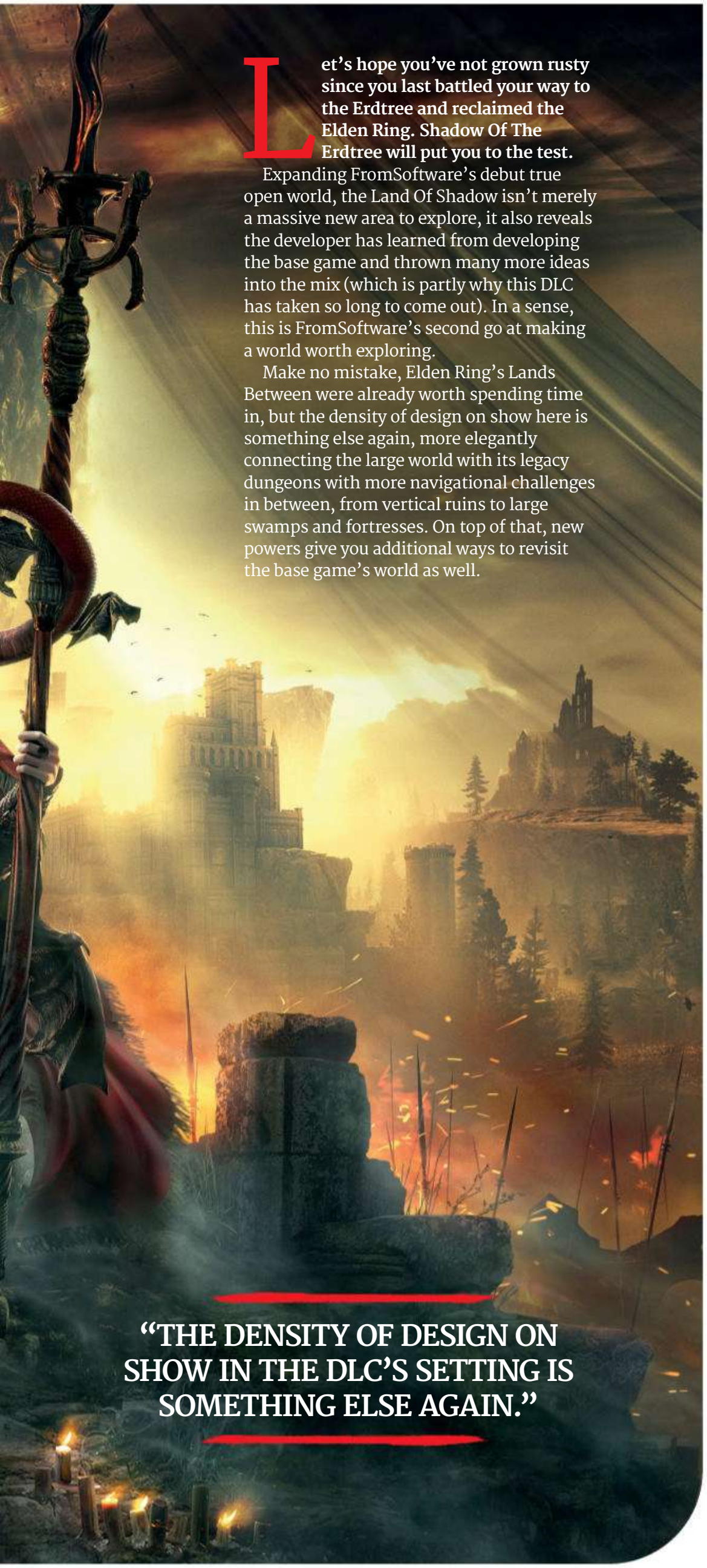
Not to be confused with Corpse Party 2, Corpse Party II is the latest entry in the macabre Japanese horror series. Playing as a group of streamers investigating a curse in an abandoned hospital, you end up being transported to a mysterious realm where you'll be met with plenty of possible bad endings as you try to escape across eight scenarios. The series is known for its lo-fi visuals, and while visual novel elements will return, this fresh new start promises full 3D visuals explorable in both third- and first-person. The jury's out on if we're brave enough for the latter.

Shadow and flame

Why **Elden Ring: Shadow Of The Erdtree** is more than simple DLC – it's a huge new open world adventure that'll take over your gaming life

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 21 JUN / **PUB** BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT
DEV FROMSOFTWARE / **PLAYERS** MULTI





Let's hope you've not grown rusty since you last battled your way to the Erdtree and reclaimed the Elden Ring. Shadow Of The Erdtree will put you to the test.

Expanding FromSoftware's debut true open world, the Land Of Shadow isn't merely a massive new area to explore, it also reveals the developer has learned from developing the base game and thrown many more ideas into the mix (which is partly why this DLC has taken so long to come out). In a sense, this is FromSoftware's second go at making a world worth exploring.

Make no mistake, Elden Ring's Lands Between were already worth spending time in, but the density of design on show here is something else again, more elegantly connecting the large world with its legacy dungeons with more navigational challenges in between, from vertical ruins to large swamps and fortresses. On top of that, new powers give you additional ways to revisit the base game's world as well.

Cracking up

Making an omelette on your way to DLC land

After finally beating Mohg in his bloody palace, we tracked down Miquella. But as he was trapped in a weird egg, hand hanging out, that was all we got. Until now.

This is how you'll access the DLC and traverse to the Land Of Shadow, Miquella calling you in as his lord, and leading you through the mysterious map himself. "Divesting himself of his flesh" is why he's been unresponsive so far, ascended into another, dark plane of existence. This aetherial connection may even suggest a deeper connection between Miquella and the previously-unseen land – is it but a dream?

Save your game here, and you should be set come June.

Feeling thorny

Bear it all, and soar like never before

Ashes Of War were one of our favourite parts of buildcrafting when it came to the base game. They're powerful and unique skills that can be attached to equipment at will, often riffing on the outlandish powers some enemies wield.

Some of the base game ones were a bit out-there, but Shadow Of The Erdtree looks like it'll take powers to the next level – one allows you to summon a floating bear's head, another has you growing wings to exchange blows while leaping up high, and another sees you sprouting thorns like an anxious hedgehog (a tactic also used by a vicious hippopotamus enemy). However, whether these are actually Ashes Of War or some new power-up has yet to be fully confirmed.

This is actually a sign of affection for some Tarnished.

Dark world

Journeying to the Land Of Shadow

Like the Lands Between, the Land Of Shadow is beneath the looming shadow of a tree. It shares a function with the Erdtree, with its split trunk drawing to mind its hidden twin, the Haligtree. Covered in veils and dripping a gold substance, it's a sad sight, a dark mirror of the world we've come to know.

Distorted reflections of the familiar define what we've seen of the Land Of Shadow so far, with ghostly gravestones overlaying the foliage of the world we know, and grounded fortresses that resemble the floating ruins of Farum Azula in the main game's sky.

There's something unreal and dreamlike about the location, but The Land Of Shadow is a real place – one that's been hidden by the Erdtree. It's where Queen Marika, the Lands Between's Empyrean ruler, first set foot (perhaps when she attained divinity), and was then the site of a war that was brutal even by Elden Ring standards. After that, Messmer The Impaler arrived to further purge it with flames. It's an unfriendly and forbidding land.

"SO FAR, WE'VE SEEN DISTORTED REFLECTIONS OF THE FAMILIAR."

The Land Of Shadow isn't just a redo. The large new map promises to be denser than ever

They've got Radagon's red hair, a snake like Rykard, and a connection to Miquella. Just who *is* Messmer?

Getting messy

Messmer The Impaler knows the pointiest end

Don't get the wrong idea, the red-headed ruler lying in await in the DLC's key art isn't Miquella – it's Messmer The Impaler. Though the bright red hair does make you think…

They're a god-like being who will be one of the main bosses you have to face down in Shadow Of The Erdtree. Their hair suggests they're a child of Marika and Radagon, much like Miquella and Malenia themselves. Could they be a long-lost sibling left to guard this annexed-from-reality land? But we know Miquella's already split from his flesh to enter this world, which could hint toward Messmer being an aspect of the missing demigod. After all, the Land Of Shadow seems

"MESSMER IS SET TO BE ONE OF THE TRICKIEST ENCOUNTERS IN THE GAME."

to be all about duality and reflections, much in the same way as Miquella's parents, Marika and Radagon, mirror one another as well.

In any case, wielding a massive spear and flame magic, Messmer is set to be one of the trickiest encounters in the game… once you're able to master this world's other challenges.

Mapped out

Big in breadth and depth

Shadow Of The Erdtree will launch about two and a half years after Elden Ring. That's a long development timeline for a piece of DLC. But for good reason, as this expansion is so large it could almost be a full game in its own right.

That's a big deal for FromSoftware, as right from the very first Dark Souls the studio's been renowned for offering some of the most substantial, highest-quality DLC updates in the business. This time around, though, with a significant amount of additional items and powers changing the way we play the game, and heaps of extra bosses and enemies being introduced, it's being taken to the next level.

It helps that the map is physically very large. The Land Of Shadow boasts an area bigger than Limgrave, and appears to be denser to boot, including legacy dungeons and plenty of areas full of secrets to uncover.

Simply navigating the landscape looks like being daunting.

Place between

An invitation to get Shreked

Poison swamps and FromSoftware go together like peanut butter and chocolate spread: delicious, but dangerous.

Their repeated inclusion in the studio's games has been a journey of self-discovery for the long-time director Hidetaka Miyazaki. Around the time of Elden Ring's launch, he told Game Informer he realised he just loves making them: "I can't help myself. It just happens." More recently, talking with Eurogamer, he revealed it's been on his mind, while confirming there will be a new swamp in Shadow Of The Erdtree. But it'll be the first time he's designed one while fully conscious of his love of making them, which he claims players will feel. The divide between open world and dungeon will be blurred too, meaning even navigating the open world is a challenge unto itself.

"Addicted to you, but I know that you're toxic," as the song goes.

Cracking skulls

Eight new ways to get fighty

You're getting more than new gear to fill out the loot tables in Shadow Of The Erdtree – you'll get some substantially different combat options to put it into action with. As with Bloodborne's weapontastic DLC, that means you're getting more options for fighting through the base game too.

We've yet to see everything we'll be enjoying, but talking to Eurogamer, director Hidetaka Miyazaki confirmed

It's difficult to trust anything in Elden Ring normally, let alone in the Land Of Shadow.

the expansion will sport eight entirely new weapon classes – essentially Erdtree's introducing eight fighting styles with which to take on its legion of rock-hard opponents.

Nioh 2 fans will be happy to see odachi thrown into the mix – essentially a very large katana, it has plenty of reach and can hit hard. Weaponised shields, meanwhile, are closer to Bloodborne's trick weapons in that they serve two functions: you're able to defend with the flat surface, and to attack with the bladed, spear-like endpoint. Thrown weapons have been expanded, with throwing daggers becoming more viable for constructing long-range builds. For those who prefer things to come in pairs, there's a type of twin curved katana that can be held in a reverse-grip, apparently emphasising agility.

Best of all, there are now martial arts, bringing a lot more depth to going unarmed. After all, sometimes the best battering you can give an opponent is with your own hands.

While that means there's plenty that's yet to be confirmed, other weapons shown off include large crossbows, bombs, and boomerangs – though as we've only spotted those in the hands of enemies it's unclear whether we'll be able to have a go with them properly. (It's also possible some may become Ashes Of War instead of full categories in their own right).

"ESSENTIALLY, ERDTREE'S INTRODUCING EIGHT NEW FIGHTING STYLES."

Making enemies

More like the Land Of Shad-foe

Bosses running into the double digits aren't the only terrors lying in wait to bash would-be lords silly. This forbidden battleground is home to all sorts of enemies looking to grind you into pulp.

They appear to be some of the strangest we've seen in Elden Ring yet. Besting them might reward you with more than just level-ups, though – additional powers potentially lie in wait, all the better to make mincemeat of Messmer The Impaler. Here are a few of the newcomers, and our not-entirely-sensible suggestions for their names...

Skelerang

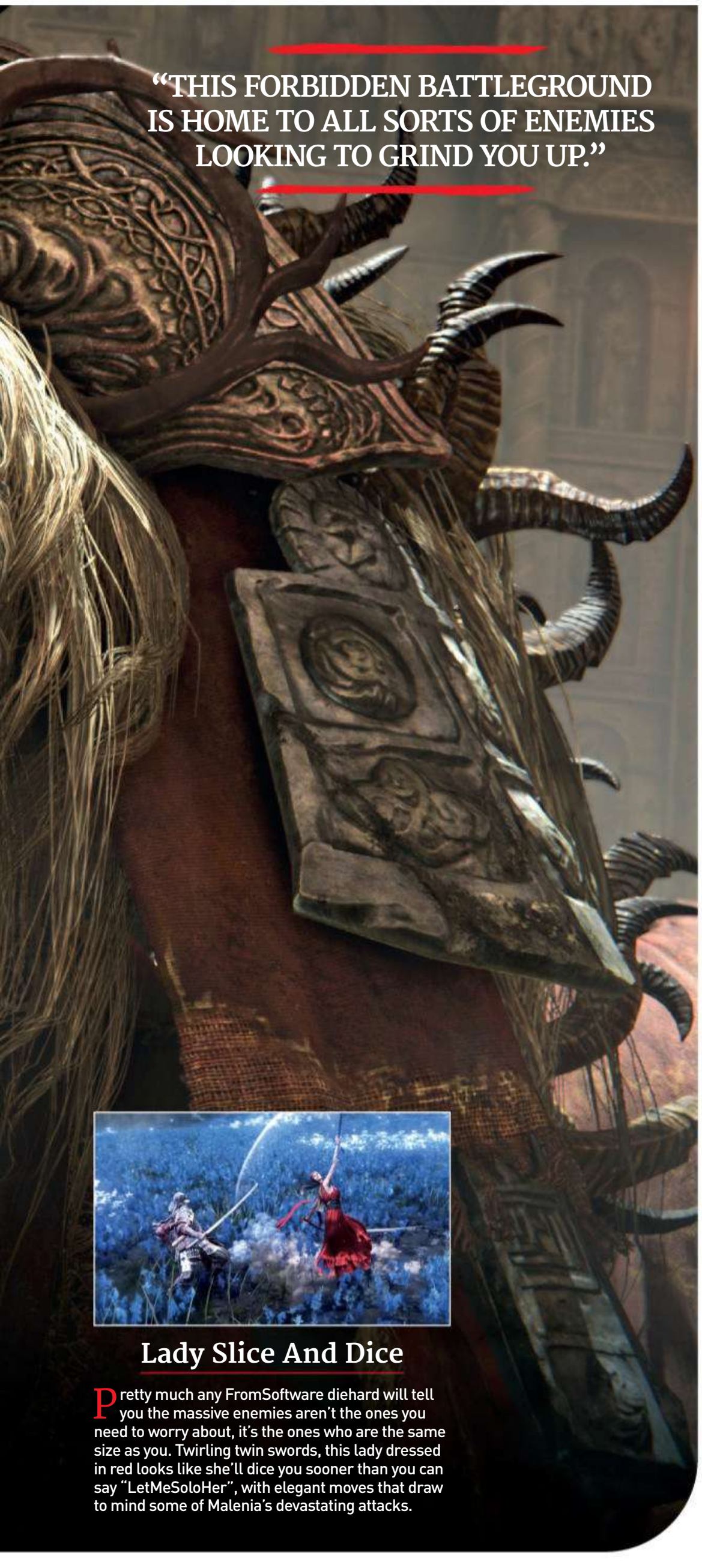
Hoo-boy, that's a half-melted horse emerging from a grim swamp with some kind of thick skeleton growing from its back, its long neck drooping so its head is upside down, holding aloft a bone boomerang. It's great to see FromSoftware letting its goofy side show with this successor to the undead boat trumpeters in the base game.

Suck-You-Lent

Even cute things might be able to get you. The little blue worm with tiny arms glimpsed in a trailer may grow, as later in the trailer there's a much larger worm with extremely long arms sucking at the head of a player. The lesson? Be careful who you annoy in the burrow, because they might use you as their own personal toothpaste.

Mister Wickham

Let's be honest, this big basket is potentially a boss fight. Speaking with IGN, Miyazaki said this flaming foe was one of the weapons used in the war that took place in the Land Of Shadow in ages past, when it would scoop people up to burn within itself. Meaning all this time later those remnants are bound to be letting off an awful stink.



"THIS FORBIDDEN BATTLEGROUND IS HOME TO ALL SORTS OF ENEMIES LOOKING TO GRIND YOU UP."

Lady Slice And Dice

Pretty much any FromSoftware diehard will tell you the massive enemies aren't the ones you need to worry about, it's the ones who are the same size as you. Twirling twin swords, this lady dressed in red looks like she'll dice you sooner than you can say "LetMeSoloHer", with elegant moves that draw to mind some of Malenia's devastating attacks.

Game Of Tomes

Building on the pages of what came before

While celebrated fantasy author George RR Martin wrote reams of lore for Elden Ring, when speaking with IGN Miyazaki confirmed he hasn't written anything new for this.

But that's no bad thing – there's simply no need for Martin to return. He wrote so much material for the base game that there wasn't room to reference it all. That's left many tangents for FromSoftware to follow up on. The Land Of Shadow is a world plagued by a shamefully brutal war to the extent it's been hidden between realities. It sounds like peak George RR Martin to us bookheads at PLAY Towers, and given the collaboration was a highlight of the base game, we can't wait to see the results of the storytelling here.

No hasty additions here; Erdtree is based on the established lore.

Prepare to die

FromSoft can't resist a challenge... for you!

Hours spent battling through FromSoftware's previous DLC offerings have taught us one thing: these hard games *can* get harder.

The likes of Bloodborne's Orphan Of Kos and Dark Souls 3's Sister Friede are among the studio's toughest boss fights. Elden Ring's huge world gave the devs ample opportunity to stuff optional, super-tough scraps into the base game, like the infamous Malenia (sister of Miquella, who features prominently in the DLC). Speaking with Eurogamer, Miyazaki specifically compared the difficulty of the DLC to that of Malenia's hefty challenge. With over ten more bosses set to feature (it's unclear how many will be mandatory in the story), that's a whole lot of potential roadblocks to overcome. But you've still got time to practise, level up, and upgrade your Mimic Tear ally before 21 June. ■

Hardest Souls boss lists watch out: we have a new challenger.

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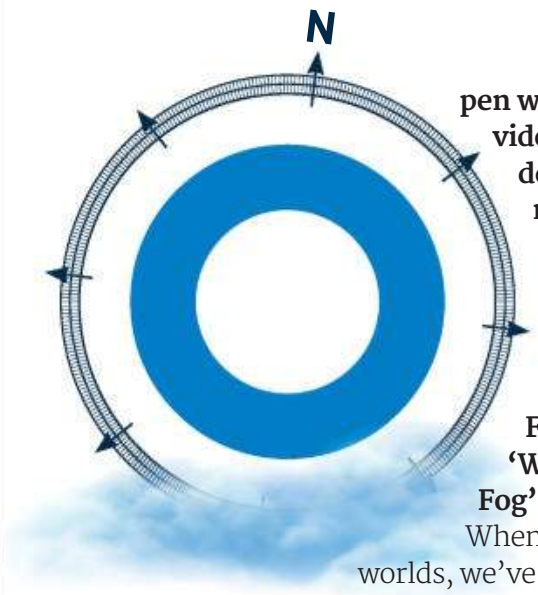
Shaping your worlds

Jess Kinghorn chats with world-building masters from Larian Studios, Techland, HoYoverse, Billy Goat Entertainment, and CD Projekt Red about what goes into crafting your favourite places on PlayStation

SHAPING YOUR WORLDS

SHAPING YOUR WORLDS



Open world design has dominated videogame settings for over a decade, and you can learn more about that history by reading our feature beginning on p62. However, more goes into building your favourite spaces than slapping Caspar David Friedrich's painting 'Wanderer Above The Sea Of Fog' on the mood board.

When it comes to immersive worlds, we've never had it so good. Recently we've crashed through the material plane of Faerûn, run through the zombie-infested streets of Villedor, duelled with Fatui Harbingers across Teyvat, popped wheelies all over New Island, and disappeared into the seedy underbelly of Night City. Losing ourselves in these spaces, we emerge to seek the insight of the master world builders behind them, asking what exactly goes into setting the scene.

"Above all else, immersion and engagement reign supreme," says Tymon Smektała, the franchise director for Dying Light. "A vast world means little if players don't feel compelled to explore its depths and uncover its secrets. It's not just about filling the map; it's about creating an experience that captivates players from start to finish."

2022's Dying Light 2 Stay Human takes place in a world nearly two decades on from a zombie outbreak, while also offering what remains a fairly unique means of getting around: parkour. In creating Villedor, situated somewhere in Europe, Techland built upon everything it had achieved with the previous game's smaller-scale Middle Eastern city setting, Harran. Full of dilapidated structures and still-towering skyscrapers, Villedor has greater verticality – so much so that you'll use a paraglider in addition to your own two feet.

The sequel's geographical shift was for a few reasons. For one, much of the series' audience hails from America and Asia, so a European setting offers something novel. Villedor takes cues from real-world cities such as French capital Paris and "some mid-sized northern German cities," as well as Techland's Polish home city. (Villedor's water towers are modelled on similar structures found in Wrocław.)

"As Europeans we're good at all things European, then for our players Europe is this place which a lot of them want to visit but [don't always have] the chance to. So we're [inviting] them to our continent," Smektała says, joking, "We just didn't mention it's full of zombies, hahaha."

GOOD MORNING, NIGHT CITY!

CD Projekt Red also hails from Poland, with studios in Wrocław, Warsaw, and Kraków, though Cyberpunk 2077's Night City is far from that comfort zone. Expert environment artist Krzysztof Kornatka shares: "Since most of the team comes from Europe, a significant challenge was adjusting to the scale and characteristics of American settings."

The team delved into books on Brutalist architecture, and exchanged Google Earth co-ordinates for sources of structural flair throughout California – Night City draws heavily upon Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Francisco. The team swapped photos of alleyways and air conditioning units, but their research didn't stop at the United States. Kornatka adds, "We also drew inspiration from the layout of Japanese streets, especially how advertising is used there."

Filtering these real cities through the lens of a far-future, technological dystopia, the goal was "to create a believable anti-utopian city, and divide it into very distinctive regions so that the player always knew where they were."

Kornatka quips, "I don't think I'll surprise anyone by saying that superbly crafted worlds in movies like Blade Runner, Johnny Mnemonic, Judge Dredd, The Fifth Element, or Akira have all served as inspiration for me."

Night City oozes style, though that alone isn't what's kept players coming back after an infamously difficult launch and many ensuing updates. Kornatka says, "I can create a very intriguing world with beautifully composed views, interesting architecture, and perfectly designed level layouts, but what am I supposed to do in that world once I've seen everything? Probably, few would even see everything if not for those events that act like a magnet, pulling players into previously undisclosed alleys."

DOWN, DOWN, DOWN BY THE RIVER

To echo Techland's Tymon Smektała, when it comes to 'compelling players to explore a world's depths and uncover its secrets,' arguably few better understand the assignment than the team behind 2023's hit RPG Baldur's Gate 3. Larian's corner of Dungeons & Dragons' Forgotten Realms is split across multiple expansive maps with clear boundaries between them.

Cyberpunk 2077 is comparable not only for Night City's distinct zones, its origins in a tabletop RPG, and the length of its development, but for how it tries to draw you in. Krzysztof Kornatka tells us he "absolutely" considers Night City an open world.

"A VAST WORLD MEANS LITTLE IF PLAYERS DON'T FEEL COMPELLED TO EXPLORE ITS DEPTHS AND UNCOVER ITS SECRETS."

However, when we chat to Larian Studios' world building director Farhang Namdar, he tells us, "Baldur's Gate 3 is not really an open world game in the modern sense. It's more of a curated open world."

Every step along Faerûn's Sword Coast has been deliberately designed. There are no random battles or suspiciously similar bases to clear, everything is placed for a reason – and that's partly why Baldur's Gate 3 took more than half a decade to make.

The crown jewel is the titular city, a huge, densely layered space which players finally reach in act three. In particular, the city's design rests upon what Namdar describes as "one of the old Larian creeds." He explains, "Every building needs a story, a secret, a cellar – preferably also a little garden but in Baldur's Gate that didn't make a lot of sense."

Wherever you go in Baldur's Gate 3, adventure awaits. Conversely, exploring Night City is more self-directed. Environment artist Krzysztof Kornatka explains, "Sometimes the player will be drawn by shouts or sounds, leading them to discover a beautiful vista of the city. At other times they might follow a mysteriously emerging alleyway between two monolithic skyscrapers to uncover an intriguing conversation that supplements their knowledge of the game and immerses them further."

Kornatka concludes, "Whatever the case may be, it's important for the player to

SHAPING YOUR WORLDS

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1 Villedor takes Dying Light's zombie action to new heights – literally.
2 Parkour allows you to get a running start on combat and survival throughout Dying Light 2.
3 Given the city's historical buildings and crumbling skyscrapers, plain old zombies are sometimes the least of your problems in Villedor.

4 Where Dying Light 2 has zombies to push you forward, Parcel Corps has time limits and coppers.
5 You won't need roads where you're going: Parcel Corps sees cyclists skilfully grinding railings and scaling building sites to get around.

SHAPING YOUR WORLDS

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1 Cyberpunk 2077 throws a wealth of cars and bikes at you, but they're far from the only way to get around Night City; the right cyberware upgrades reveal a surprisingly vertical city. 2 Despite Night City's visual noise, this tech dystopia is a distinctly lonely, isolating place to be. 3 Distrust hangs heavy in the air over Night City. You can trust your allies about as much as you can trust the dilapidated architecture all around. 4 If you thought Night City was grimy, wait until you take a tour through Dogtown in the Phantom Liberty DLC. 5 Unusually for the genre, Night City lets the light in – though high noon always casts the deepest shadows.

feel rewarded. Depending on how much time they have to invest in reaching their goal, this reward should be greater."

Larian's Farhang Namdar puts it another way, "Players love walking into a seemingly innocent apothecary and ending up two hours and three puzzles later in a sacrificial chamber of a cult that murders giraffes."

BOOK ENDS

Metropolitan mammal murder aside, few starting points are as memorable as the tadpoled adventurer departing the Nautiloid crash site and finding their way through the wilderness in Baldur's Gate 3's opening act.

"The journeys we create are always in service of the narrative," Namdar tells us, "For the hero's journey we always have to start humble and end as a hero."

As you travel from the wilderness into the Shadow-Cursed Lands, and finally out towards the city, the team at Larian exploit the boundaries of each area to elevate your adventure. When you move from the almost bucolic scenery of act one into the soul-sapping darkness of act two, Farhang Namdar explains this contrast offers "the feeling of story progression," and it's a trick Larian uses repeatedly.

While the wilderness has fights sprinkled like glitter alongside scintillating conversation, and the Shadow-Cursed Lands see you scurrying between bright spots, the final act's city was designed more in the vein of "a classic dungeon grinder with house-to-house navigation, lots of cellars, underground areas, [and so on]."

"We wanted to give every act its own personal flavour. We wanted to start out familiar but with a clear goal for the player," Namdar begins, going on to say, "So act one was more of a classic RPG start with a clear objective: the player is exploring the wilderness while trying to extract the tadpole in their head. Act two restricted the player's movement through the Shadow-Cursed lands, which created a completely different dynamic allowing the player to meet the forces of darkness and those who rebel against them. Act three brightened up the playthrough and introduced city gameplay."

INSIDE STORY

It's far from the only game in which the environment so directly reflects your protagonist's narrative journey. Live service title Genshin Impact features the massive setting of Teyvat, a world that's been expanded through frequent updates, some of which have introduced totally new regions to lose yourself in. The latest of these is Fontaine, a water-logged land described as a 'terrestrial sea.' In terms of scale as much as anything else, it's a far cry from where the Traveler's journey begins.

We chatted to the internal team responsible for Genshin Impact at developer HoYoverse, and they offered answers collectively over email.

"The areas that have already been released carry the Travelers' experiences in specific phases of their journey," the team tell us. "As a result, the way they've been designed also differs. For example, content density in [the starting city of] Mondstadt is relatively low."

This was in part for practicality's sake, they say, "One reason is the limited technology and experience we had during the early development of Genshin Impact," before adding, "In the meantime, because Mondstadt is the first area players can explore, we also hope to start easy and evolve step-by-step."

Teyvat is a land dominated by the will of the seven Archons (essentially gods), and the differing ideals they hold dear. Mondstadt's Archon is known by a few names, including the God Of Freedom. As a result, this Archon does not rule directly over Mondstadt, instead preferring to play music and sip dandelion wine, enabling the city's people to forge their own fates; it's a fitting first step into this expansive live service game. Teyvat's second region offers a direct thematic contrast, as the land of Liyue is ruled over by an Archon known as the God Of Contracts.

To put it another way, the Traveler has gone from being a stranger in a strange land with a horizon of opportunity ahead to forging bonds that give them a reason to stay – or at least keep them and you, the player, coming back.

OPEN THE PARCEL

Movement mechanics are another essential part of the bigger world-shaping picture, so let's shift gears. We spoke to William Barr, the director of Billy Goat Entertainment, about the studio's wheelie exciting upcoming project, Parcel Corps. If you missed our preview coverage in PLAY issue #37, think Jet Set Radio meets Crazy Taxi but with bicycle couriers trying to outpace the demands of the gig economy with nothing but two wheels and their wits.

> "DURING THE DESIGN OF THE ENTIRE MAP, PLAYER FREEDOM IN MOVEMENT WAS VERY IMPORTANT TO US."

Central setting New Island is a place you can cycle across from end to end, but isn't an 'open world' in the traditional sense. "It is level-based. Each zone in the city forms its own self-contained level, but if you want to travel all the way around the map you can. We usually have a small bridge or tunnel that informs you that you're entering a new zone," Barr explains, before quipping, "We're old skool!"

New Island is literally not a level playing field; your cycling courier can grind rails, defy gravity by launching themself off ramps, or glide across walls like they're straight out of Tokyo-to.

"We took inspiration from our own, personal commutes. Nothing is as frustrating as getting caught in traffic. Often, the best thing to do is ride along the side of a bus, jump onto some scaffolding, then grind along some railings while pedestrians throw themselves out of your way," Barr jokes. "Some of that is exaggerated – in real life the pedestrians don't always manage to move quickly enough."

Parcel Corps refracts modern-day mundanity through a funhouse mirror. Barr says the team were going for a "Transatlantic-type vibe" for New Island. "Being based in the UK, we are most familiar with cities and architecture over here," Barr admits, "but the weather here sucks, and the 'blue skies, '90s arcade' aesthetic has more of an American, West Coast feel. So we kind of merge those two aesthetics together."

The people who populate New Island are larger-than-life, and humour is baked into the world design. When we ask Barr about this, he quips, "I presume you're referring to all the signage with naughty names?" He goes on to add, "We also like to indulge in a bit of the ol' 'environmental storytelling' that level designers love – for example, [discovering] the offices of Billy Goat Entertainment with an eviction letter stapled to the door." He continues, jovially, "A sign of things to come, no doubt, art imitating life.

"But back to the naughty names – all I'll say is that the depravity of some of our more mild-mannered team members continues to shock me," Barr jokes. "In fairness, most of this stuff flies over my head. I lead a very sheltered existence, but this project has definitely been an education."

Proving his point, Barr then shares that when it comes to level design, "We do love a good weenie."

Let's scoop our minds out of the gutter: 'weenie' is a term that originates in theme park design, describing a point of visual interest (think the Disney parks' central castle) that draws visitors towards it – it's not filthy, it's magical. Barr explains, "Trying to ensure that there are good sight lines so you can catch a glimpse or two of a large weenie (for example, cranes in a construction yard) really does help."

BRICK BY BRICK

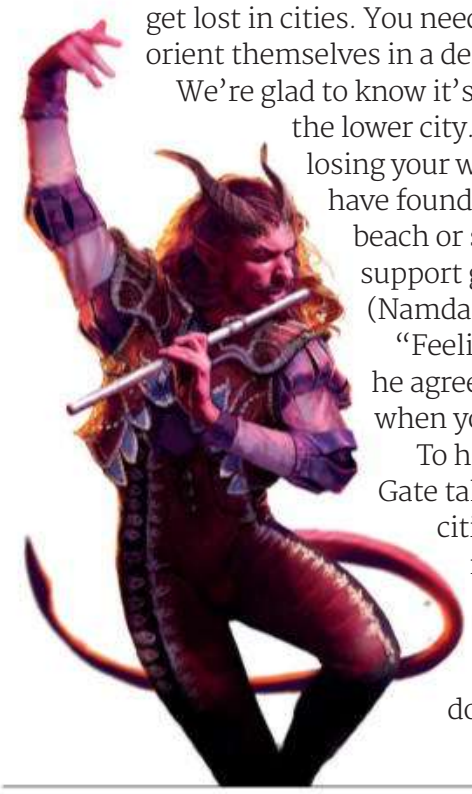
Ensuring players find their way through a non-linear space is no easy design feat – and Larian Studios signed up for one hell of a challenge.

"I remember the day Swen [Vincke, Larian's CEO] told me that our next project was BG3. I literally went from joy to anxiety in a couple of seconds," Namdar shares. "We had joked about this frequently back in the days, so in many ways it was a dream come true. It was a great honour and a lot of pressure to develop the next instalment of this groundbreaking franchise. We just knew we had to make something unique to fulfil our commitment to the fans, [though] it wasn't easy following up on what is widely regarded as one of the greatest RPGs of all time."

Besides all of that, Namdar stresses, "Building good RPG cities is extremely difficult."

He describes all the plates Larian has to keep spinning, saying, "We have to account for the gameplay composition. The cadence at which you encounter things. When and where you experience combat. At what point you talk and if the backdrop is incredible enough for the cinematic dialogue. How long you walk before you reach another dead end. How we light areas to make sure the corner of your eye catches a point of interest that can get you out of that dead end. The spaces we create and objects we place to convey the story and communicate the important narrative beats – all of the above while keeping an eye on how the game performs on various platforms."

Namdar delves into the main city's central design challenge: "You always have to deal with the density of events and navigation. Players, including myself, always get lost in cities. You need a natural way for players to orient themselves in a dense environment."



We're glad to know it's not just us taking wrong turns in the lower city. Though in such a dense space, losing your way can be an asset – would we have found the zombie camping out on the beach or stumbled upon the hag victims' support group without poking around? Or (Namdar's favourite) the Festering Cove?

"Feeling lost is part of the gameplay," he agrees, "[But] it becomes frustrating when you feel lost all the time."

To help better situate players, Baldur's Gate takes inspiration from the historical cities throughout the Mediterranean, many situated close to the sea.

"We knew that we had to build the city on a slope so the player could always pan the camera down to the shoreline and up to the city wall for orientation," Namdar explains. "Heading into the city meant the water was always on your left, while heading back meant the water was on your right. Climbing up meant you were heading towards the city walls, climbing down was the shoreline."

TAKES A VILLAGE

In addition to top-level wayfinding landmarks, BG3 is full of smaller signposts – metaphorically and literally. Larian tries to "frequently remind [players] of the [act's] narrative beats" through environmental touches such as how an area is decorated, along with ambient and direct conversations with NPCs that "reflect the state of the story."

For CD Projekt Red's Krzysztof Kornatka, solid world building extends far beyond the critical path; he tells us it's all about allowing the player to understand "the world, its history, relationships, and intrigues simply by observing the environment."

He goes on to say, "Whenever I can, I add something that emphasises the character of a particular place. Sometimes these are small things – for instance, the traces of a crime at a subway entrance right next to a police station show that the NCPD has little to say in the area."

But world building is more than tiny details. Kornatka starts, "While working on the Arasaka area, one of the directors asked for something to commemorate the explosion of the main Arasaka headquarters in 2023." Drawing inspiration from the film Demolition Man, Kornatka created the Arasaka Memorial, a massive space preserving part of the original lobby along with some of the street nearby, museum-style.

> "BALDUR'S GATE 3 IS NOT REALLY AN OPEN WORLD GAME IN THE MODERN SENSE. IT'S MORE OF A CURATED OPEN WORLD."

We'll skirt spoilers and say it makes sense to go big on an event in the city's past that ultimately sets much of Cyberpunk 2077's plot in motion, but Kornatka then shares, "I found out that they originally just expected a commemorative plaque somewhere on the side of the building. What can I say? In [CD Projekt Red's] City Team, we like to utilise larger spaces!"

World building is one way to signpost things, though sometimes ensuring players don't feel lost or overwhelmed is a matter of pacing. "Whenever the player starts to feel frustrated, the possibility to reach an elevated location happens to [be nearby]," Farhang Namdar slyly remarks.

MAPPING A LEGEND

It's all a balancing act – one that can be completely undone by your own map. Genshin Impact expands into new regions at least once a year, with long-established areas like Liyue sometimes receiving tweaks too through updates. For instance, new subregion Chenyu Vale now connects Liyue to Fontaine by water. But with each additional region bigger and more ambitious than the last, the original maps didn't really – ahem – *cover* it any more.

The team share, "The old maps could no longer precisely display the terrain and allow players to easily locate Teleport Waypoints. [...] As a result, when we launched Fontaine and its underwater areas last year, we added the Multi-Layered Map feature. This feature was also applied to areas that had already been released."

But how often have we delved into an open world only to let most of it pass us by as we beeline to the next waypoint? It's a struggle CD Projekt Red's Krzysztof Kornatka knows all too well. "You can always follow [Cyberpunk 2077's] GPS if you want to reach your destination as quickly as possible," Kornatka begins, "but if you prefer to embody the role of a netrunner or sniper, it's worth exploring the

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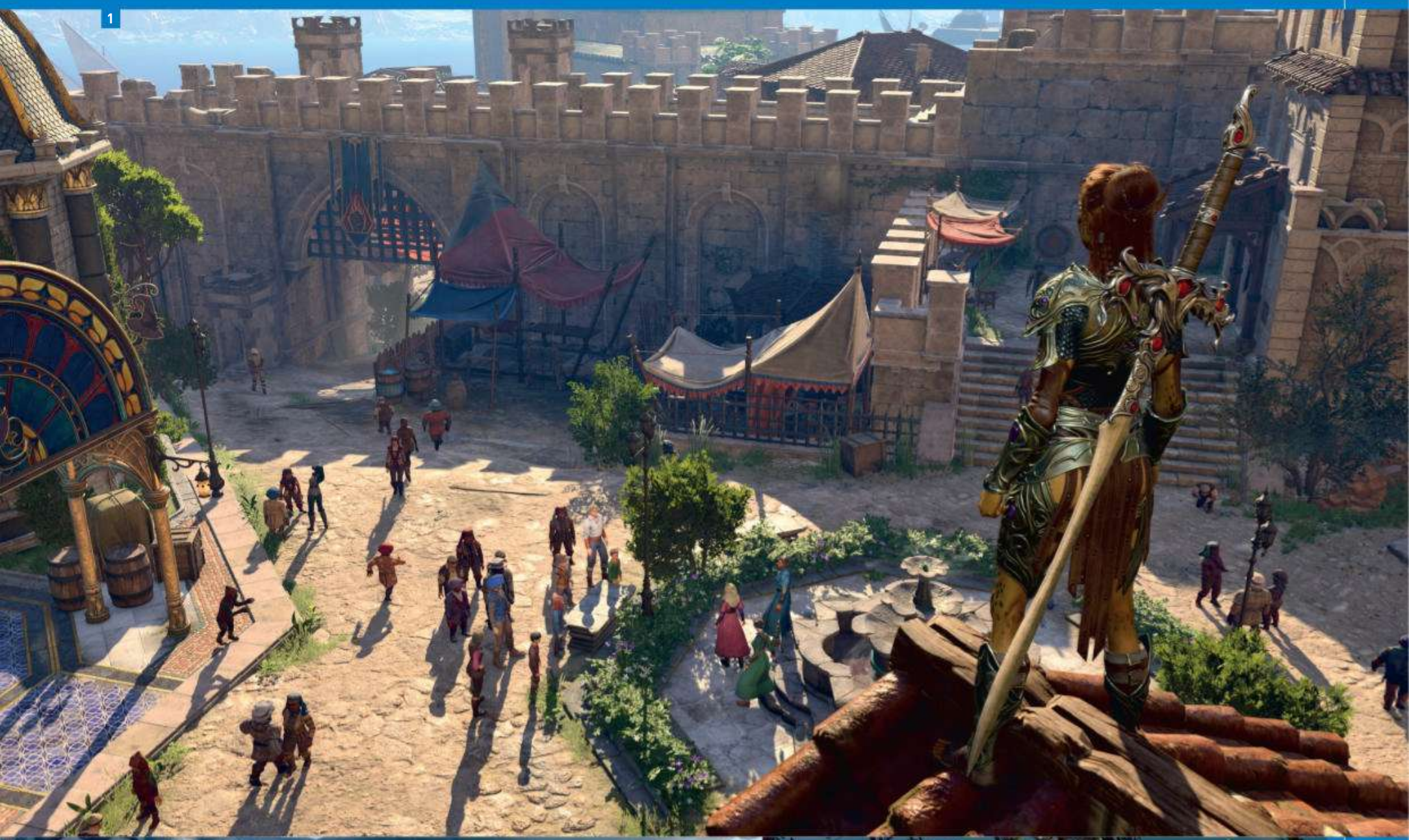
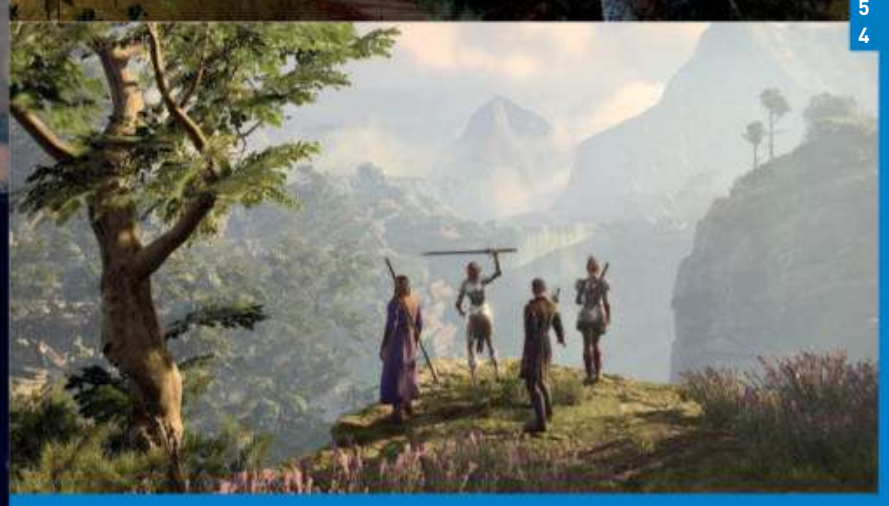
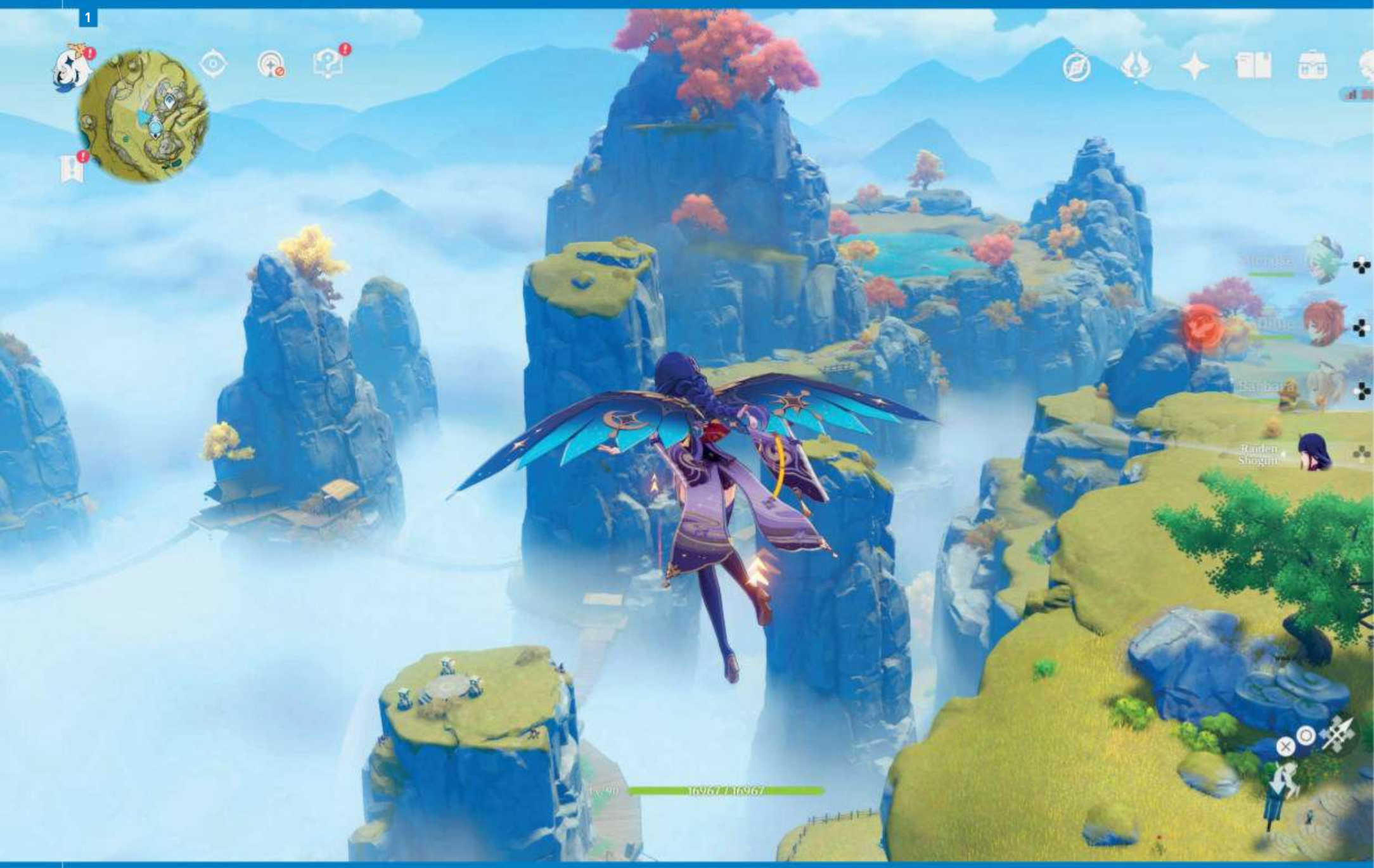




1 Baldur's Gate 3 offers environments you'll want to get lost in. Every cellar, and every corner of the city has something to find. 2 Few starting points are as memorable as the Nautiloid crash site in Baldur's Gate 3. 3 One of the best reveals in the first act of Baldur's Gate 3 is heading deeper underground for a fresh realm of adventure. 4 Faerûn is a setting that draws you in and onwards thanks to smart world design and storytelling. 5 Far from over: Baldur's Gate 3 grows grander with frequent updates. Don't hold your breath for totally fresh DLC though.

SHAPING YOUR WORLDS



1 Teyvat is another setting that boasts a strong sense of verticality thanks to the glider. 2 Genshin Impact is always growing, with massive new regions, such as the lush jungles and arid deserts of Sumeru, added every year. 3 The world of Genshin Impact is brought to life by a fleet of characters who you can get to know through hangout events, side-quests... and gacha pulls. 4 Even well established regions of Teyvat are far from static. Long-standing Land Of Contracts Liyue just got a new subregion to explore: Chenyu Vale. 5 Teyvat borrows inspiration from around the world. The region of Liyue borrows from the historic past of developer HoYoverse's home country, China.

area thoroughly. You might find a passage to a higher level from where you can better assess the situation or quickly escape to a nearby parking lot where the good old Quadra you parked earlier is waiting for you. During the design of the entire map, player freedom in movement was very important to us."

Combat both scars and shapes Night City. "When firearm combat comes into play, the environmental design undergoes a total transformation," says Kornatka, "We [on Cyberpunk 2077] need to provide places for both the player and enemies to take cover from gunfire. Conversely, in melee combat scenarios, it's quite the opposite. Having all manner of cover becomes rather annoying for the player, as they have to contend with obstacles in the environment that hinder deadly acrobatics or swift evasions from strikes."

Kornatka goes on to say, "At the very beginning, the player doesn't have access to the entire map. Of course, this is explained narratively and supported visually. This allows them to gradually explore and get to know the character of Night City. Naturally, the GPS system comes in handy, but as an environment artist I always strive to create standout landmarks, often with specific characteristics for each region, allowing the player to recognise where they are without consulting the map."

Spotting landmarks in dense, urban environments can be tricky, so the team deployed a number of other subtle signposts. For instance, each of Night City's six districts has its own personality, expressed through "its own architectural style, lighting colour, and dominant hue." Graffiti also clues you in, as each gang's influence on its home turf is represented visually, daubed all over the walls.

WIDE HORIZONS

The cartoony visuals of Parcel Corps prove essential to finding your way. "When the game was at the white box stage, it was much more difficult to learn a zone," William Barr shares. "However, when the art got added it became so much easier."

He continues, "Much to the dismay of our environment artists, we didn't go down the whole [procedurally] generated route when it came to the environment. Largely this was because you can ride on pretty much every surface in the game, thus necessitating a bit more TLC for our concrete boxes, which ensures they have a unique, hand-crafted look, aiding the player in remembering them."

The team at Billy Goat Entertainment approach crafting cycle paths in several ways. "Some of the team find it helpful to have a theme, or a key piece of architecture that they'll then plan routes around. Others prefer just to whitebox something that they think is fun. It all then gets iterated over," Barr explains.

There's nothing stopping players from mixing and matching routes either. Barr adds, "When we drop missions in, people typically find their own way around – maybe they only use part of one of these planned routes but then do something unplanned for the rest. If a route seems cool, we then try and accommodate it in another design pass."

Finding your own way through Dying Light 2 makes traversal in that game compelling too. One of the key challenges of building Villedor was creating an environment that would be fun for anyone to get around. Tymon Smektała reflects, "This means that we had to make it accessible to newcomers (and please bear in mind that parkour, especially in [first-person perspective], is actually quite a difficult gameplay mechanic to grasp), but at the same time make it so people that are willing to engage with it and learn it could feel that their abilities increase with time."

> "I ALWAYS STRIVE TO CREATE STANDOUT LANDMARKS [...] ALLOWING THE PLAYER TO RECOGNISE WHERE THEY ARE."

The team have worked to build environments that offer players plenty of opportunity to "connect their [parkour] moves in an interesting way", with much of the fun of spaces like this or Parcel Corp's colourful New Island being the simulation of a physicality that can be tricky to imitate in real life.

Genshin Impact sees you sprint, climb, swim, and glide all over incredible vistas. The team sum up the appeal beautifully: "Teyvat is a fantasy world, and we hope actions done by players are better rewarded here than in the real world."

FLIGHT AND FIGHT

From unlockable shortcuts to the speed-boosting trick system, Parcel Corps offers a space that is intended to feel "fun to just potter about [in]." But with so many options for making your own way, how do you encourage players to shun the path of least resistance? Well, New Island doesn't just pave the way for bikes – your courier can be corralled by coppers or sent flying by careless cars.

"We try to encourage the player to avoid the roads where possible. We have to include roads that somewhat make sense to make the city seem believable, but just following them can be quite dull," Barr admits. "So, to discourage that, one thing we do is carve alleys and suggest other shortcuts to get you off there and also, yeah, make the cars a little unforgiving. Not unlike real life I should add – I mean, I've been hit by a couple of cars while on my bike in real life, and it was never terribly pleasant."

Tension is the lifeblood of so many virtual environments. For instance, Dying Light 2's zombies make sure you maintain your momentum across the city. "[The presence of the Infected] actually impacted [the design of Villedor] a lot, especially in areas like visibility range or how tight the playable areas are," Tymon Smektała explains. "We want players to be surprised by zombies that they notice at the very last moment, we want them to feel that the threat those zombies pose is basically at the reach of their hands. We used a lot of tricks there but I don't want to uncover all of our secrets..."

The danger of missing the jump is always there, though falling to your death over and over arguably isn't 'fun'.

Smektała says, "So if the jump is – for example – two metres, then we have gaps that are 1.8 [metres] in range, to leave players some room for error."

Often, you're surviving by a hair's breadth but nonetheless, you are still *surviving*. "For many players, Dying Light became this total zombie experience [...] where they can jump in at any minute, spend some time in the locations that we've built, having fun surviving," Smektała tells us. He also shares, "Sometimes [the] fun is really mindless and you just run around checking if you can kill all of the zombies in sight, but usually it's more grounded, more serious, more tense [survival]."

The result is a 'zombie playground' that keeps players coming back, and *that's* the real secret ingredient, the real mark of success for any videogame setting or immersive world – the return of the player. After all, without you hitting START, without you deciding it's a place worth fighting for, the world ceases to be. Maybe with that same passion, we can save our real world from its own apocalypse.

GENERATION OPEN

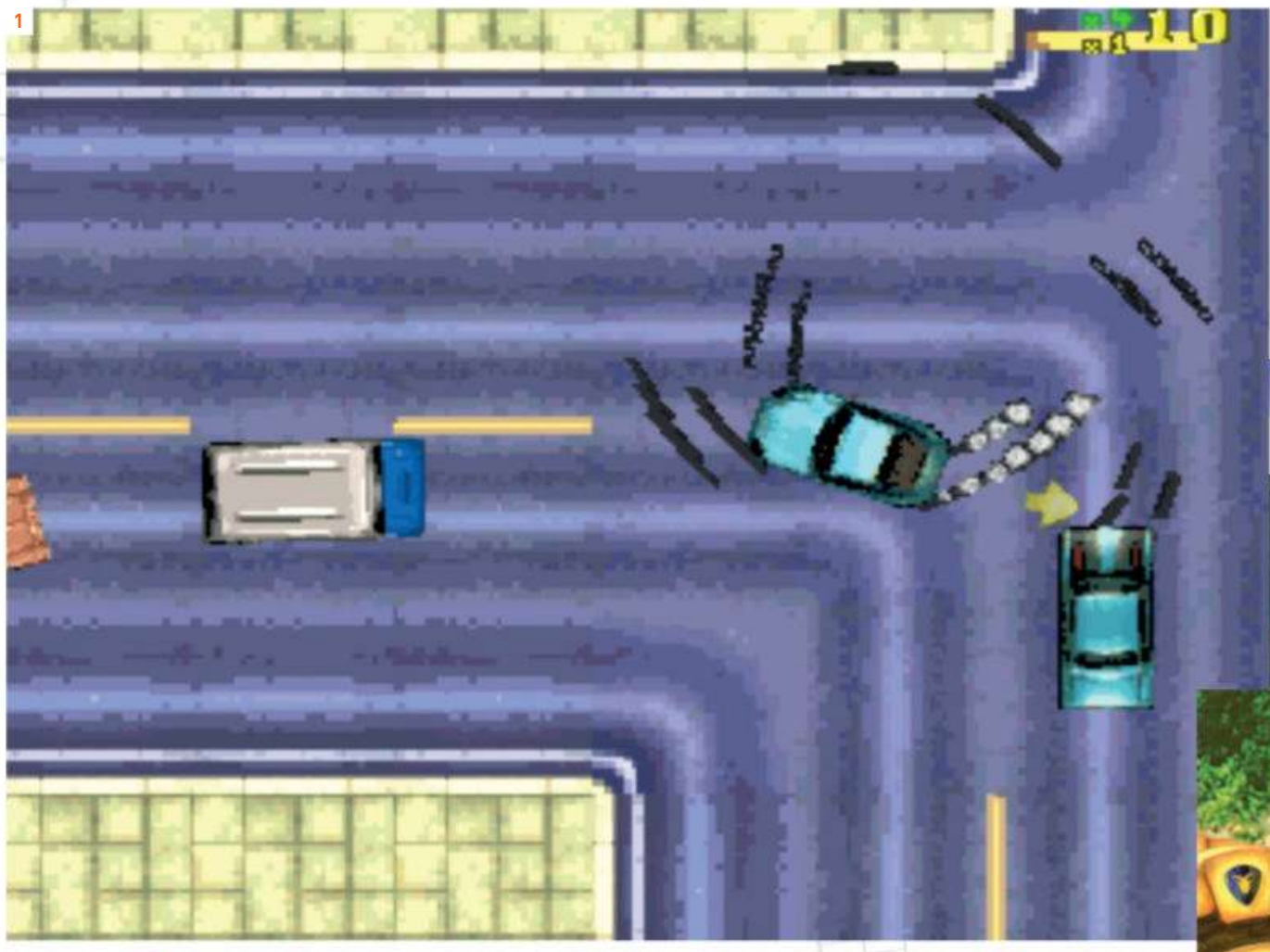
From ambitious RPGs to sweeping adventures, Jeremy Peel unpacks the history of the open world from PS1 to PS5

"That mountain is not just a backdrop," Todd Howard once said, introducing Skyrim to the world. "You can walk all the way to the top of that mountain." The winning quote has become immortalised as a meme: "See that mountain? You can climb it."

It's a phrase that encapsulates both the wonder and familiarity of open worlds and the genre that's been built around them, echoed in many game reveals since. How did the promise of distant peaks become not only possible, but a cliché? For that story, we have to go right back to the beginning of PlayStation, and a little beyond. The open world genre is a technical miracle; the work of thousands of developers over decades. And that work isn't yet done.

See that planet? You can fly there.

Horizon Forbidden West's huge world is just one reason it serves as a tech showpiece for PS5.



1 The top-down chaos of Grand Theft Auto offered a freedom of play, though it wouldn't coalesce until a generation later. 2 The scale of FFVII's world was driven home by its many secrets and the feeling of mastery as you accrued more ways to explore. 3 Entering towns in FFVII changed perspective, beautiful pre-rendered backgrounds and bustling NPCs bringing the world to life. RPGs were our first taste of what 'open' could really mean.

PLAYSTATION

The rise of the overworld

Early in PlayStation's life there were no continuous 3D open worlds to be had. Levels had borders and great distances were travelled only via loading screens. A skybox provided your sense of a horizon, never to be crossed. Yet even within these hard technological constraints, RPG designers managed to design the first overworlds – connecting discrete areas via imagination and sticky tape.

It began in the 1980s, with Ultima. Richard Garriott's influential RPG tasked the hero with navigating a fantasy overworld dotted with blocky icons representing castles and pirate ships. Japanese designers looking to the West for inspiration did the same, sending an oversized player sprite deep into the forests and mountain ranges of Dragon Quest to fight in random encounters with slimes.

By the mid '90s, on PlayStation, Final Fantasy VII carried the torch for that same sense of scale and exploration. Square's classic adventure was intimate enough to sell relationships with characters like Barret and Aerith and to allow you to track every sword swing in battle. Yet it also zoomed out – first to take in the industrial majesty of Midgar, and then again, far beyond the boundaries of the opening metropolis.

THE WORLD IS YOURS

"Just when it appears that the entire game will take place in the city," wrote IGN in its 1997 review, "the venue changes to a fully 3D, fully rotatable engine, and players will find that the city is a mere dot on the enormous world map." The planet of Gaia was pockmarked with towns and ruins, as well as natural barriers like deserts – impassable areas that the player would overcome with the help of vehicles. For all its limitations and separate layers, Final Fantasy VII evoked the fundamental feeling that still powers the open world genre: freedom.

Soon afterwards, it became apparent that vehicles were a natural accompaniment to the sweeping scale of open worlds. Enter Grand Theft Auto, with its sports cars, pickups, and limos – all accessible at the press of a button, and at the expense of whichever civilian was driving them.

> "FFVII EVOKED THE FUNDAMENTAL FEELING THAT STILL POWERS THE OPEN WORLD GENRE: FREEDOM."

In truth, the original GTA didn't quite live up to its pitch of having three explorable cities (Liberty, Vice, and San Andreas, now well known to us all). The top-down 2D perspective and dearth of memorable landmarks made higher-level navigation impossible, at least without regular consultation of the physical city map that came in the box. But in its own crude way, 1997's GTA provided the blueprint for the rest of the series, offering players not only geographical freedom but freedom from law and order too.

PLAYSTATION 2

Now entering city limits

That's not quite all the grey box wrote – in the dying days of PS1, a studio in Newcastle attempted what GTA's inventors hadn't dared: to create an open world city game in full 3D. Sure, there were moments when muscle cars collided with police cruisers in midair and Driver slowed to a crawl. But developer Reflections had effectively predicted the next decade of the open world genre's growth – which became a pop-cultural explosion with the creation of Grand Theft Auto III.

While the old hands at Rockstar North were wary of exceeding their technological limits, younger staff at the studio had already built a free-roaming game in the form of Nintendo 64's Earth defence fantasy Body Harvest. "So, we did a tech demo of a city environment on the Dreamcast," Rockstar North co-studio head and art director Aaron Garbut told PLAY back in 2021. "With cars driving around and characters walking the streets."

GTA FREE

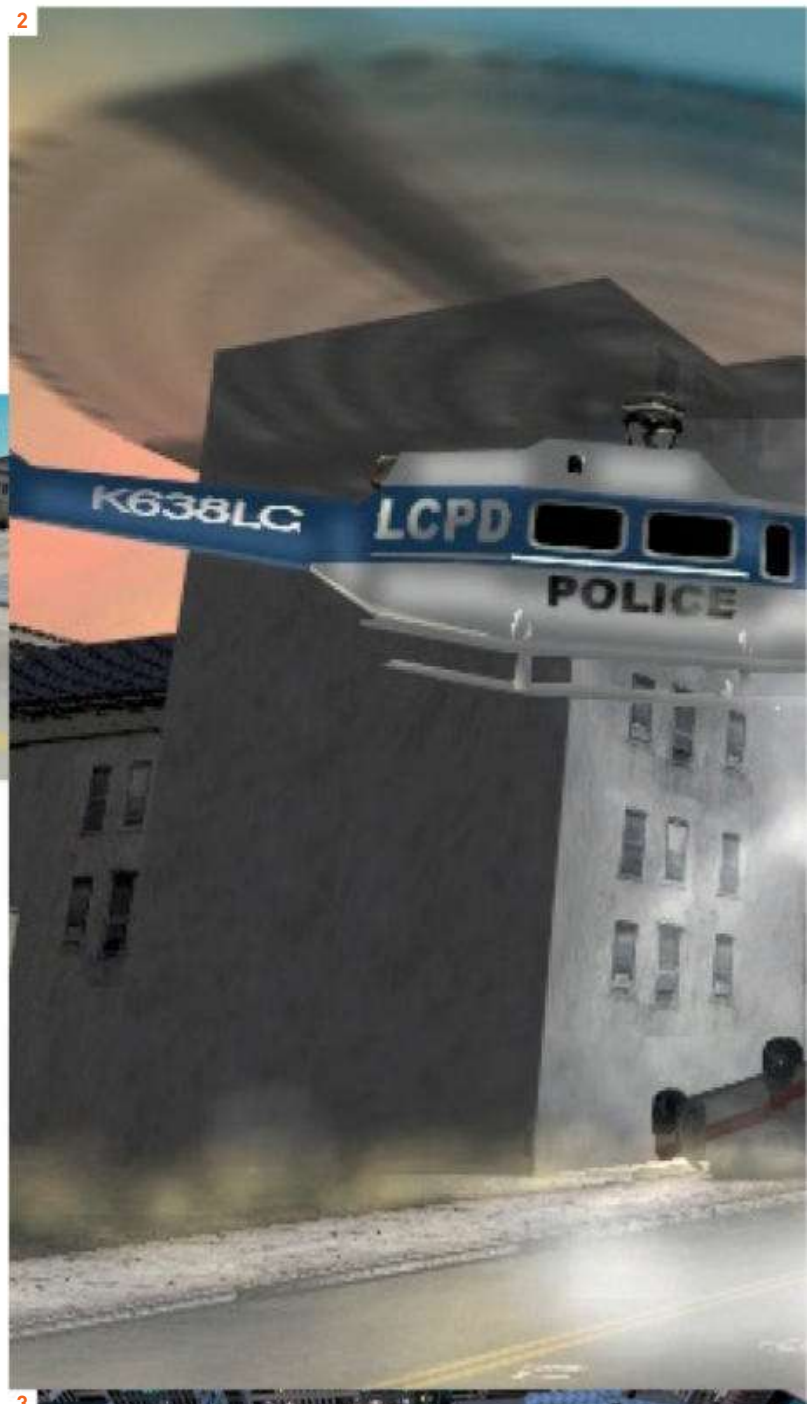
Small wonder nobody had attempted anything similar before. Even with the new power of PS2, Grand Theft Auto III was asking a lot from the hardware. "We didn't split things into nice manageable, loadable chunks," Garbut explained. "We didn't spread it out with empty areas, we didn't design it to only work at speed or to explore in detail on foot in small areas. We were trying to offer an all in one experience, and to make it feel as alive as possible."

> "WE GOT AS GRANULAR AS WRITING THE FILES TO THE DVD IN SPECIFIC ORDERS TO KEEP AREAS TOGETHER."

GTA III was made feasible only by innovative level streaming, which loaded and unloaded the environment as the player careened around Liberty City. "The art team broke the world apart by hand in the best way to squeeze all we could into memory while getting it off the drive fast enough," Garbut said. "The code team built an elegant streaming system and we got as granular as writing the files to the DVD in specific orders to keep areas of the world together physically on the disc. It's a testament to the talent and ingenuity of the team that we made this work." Near-impossible though it may have been, this technical feat established a norm that still informs the way open world games are structured today.

Not that anybody was talking about the 'open world genre' in 2001. Back then, there was only GTA, and the games that gratefully inhaled its fumes. They were called the GTA clones. The Simpsons: Hit & Run, True Crime: Streets Of LA, even Driver 3 – all mimicked Rockstar's blueprint in the years that followed. Few managed to break free from it, though Mafia deserves special mention for treating its open world like a movie set for a cinematic story rather than a toybox. It's an approach that would ultimately be revisited by developers in the 2010s, resulting in more thoughtful and story-driven free roaming games like LA Noire and Red Dead Redemption 2.

On PS2, however, only a couple of other games pointed towards a future for the open world genre beyond Liberty City's boundaries. One was Treyarch's Spider-Man 2, a tie-in to the Sam Raimi film that far exceeded the atrocious standards of games-of-movies at the time. While Treyarch's Manhattan is modest by today's standards, it's astonishing to discover just how much of the moveset of the modern Insomniac games was laid down in 2004, from the vertical wallclimbs and charged jumps to the



1 Simply cruising around the city in 3D was worth Driver's sticker price on PS1 – if you could beat the infamous training mission. 2 Flip the page and compare this shot from GTA III with the original game. To say it was a step up is an understatement. This was a level of ambition that redefined the industry as a whole. 3 Few PS2 open worlds could boast Spider-Man 2's tremendous sense of momentum. A movie tie-in that goes beyond its roots. 4 GTA III spawned many imitators. We've a soft spot for the The Getaway, from the sadly closed PlayStation London Studio (known then as Team Soho).

webswinging that automatically finds an appropriate anchor point on a nearby building. Treyarch posited that traversal in open world games should be as easy as breathing – a part of the empowerment the genre promised.

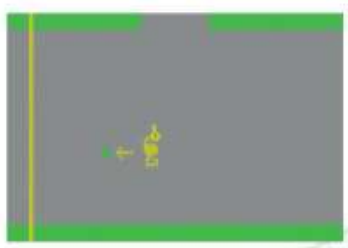
Then there was Just Cause, a Swedish invention which dropped a secret agent onto a Caribbean island and asked him to topple a dictator with the help of a guerrilla group. "We had what we called the Avalanche credo," studio co-founder Christofer Sundberg told Edge in 2022. "'If you see it, you can go there. And if you poke it, it reacts'. That was something we all lived by, to build really living and breathing worlds where you could encourage exploration and tease the player to go to that mountain, far off in the distance. And we could put a little house up there, or an event, or a radar tower that was so popular to blow up."

Just Cause simulated player-made chaos on a huge scale – and unlike GTA, it did so in a location many players associated with recreation, with holidays. Rather than push you exclusively towards missions, Avalanche's world was filled with villages to liberate and cartel hideouts to take over, creating a gameplay loop driven as much by distraction and flowstate as explicit objectives.

More than anything, Just Cause suggested that the player's relationship with an open world could be territorial. It's a notion that's proved satisfying and troubling in equal measure as other developers have run with it ever since.

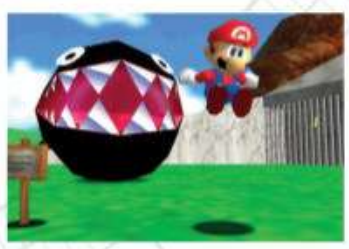
OFF THE MAP

A look at some genre-defining moments that didn't come to PlayStation at the time



ADVENTURE (1980, ATARI 2600)

A square avatar dragging keys between grey rooms. It might not sound like the open world genre as we know it now, but Adventure was the earliest graphical adventure to wow players with the ability to explore a dragon-infested fantasy kingdom. A fantasy kingdom made up of 30 rooms, that is.



SUPER MARIO 64 (1996, N64)

Nintendo didn't just set its mascot free in this first 3D iteration, it set the camera free too. Being able to steer Mario in any direction was a genuine revelation, and his moveset of interconnected kicks and jumps made the simple act of getting around a joy. Many open world developers have reached for those heights since.

BODY HARVEST (1998, N64)

The team that became Rockstar North cut its teeth on this game about a genetically engineered soldier who travels through time to save the planet from aliens. Body Harvest allowed players to commandeer vehicles. And, foreshadowing what was to come with GTA, Nintendo declined to publish the game due to its violence.

SHENMUE (1999, DREAMCAST)

The revenge story of Ryo Hazuki in 1980s Japan was charmingly unglamorous. Whether taking a part-time job at the docks or spending your money sensibly, it encouraged you to take your role in its open world seriously – while NPCs followed their own mundane routines around you.

OUTCAST (1999, PC)

Outcast still exists as a series today, but it'll never be as exciting as it was in 1999, when the huge alien environments and long draw distance most impressed. Back then, riding a beast of burden through futuristic forests, swamps, and deserts was an extraordinary novelty. Today, you can play Avatar: Frontiers Of Pandora.

PLAYSTATION 3

As far as the eye can see

For decades, consoles and computers had existed as separate ecosystems. But when the multiplatform era kicked in, that gulf began to close, and PlayStation gamers finally got a taste of what their PC-owning peers had been enjoying. The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion was the culmination of more than ten years' work in open world design, and made Bethesda Game Studios a major player in the genre, introducing the console audience to a more grounded and immersive form of Western RPG wanderlust.

Oblivion went deep as well as broad, simulating the physics of every bottle of communion wine within its churches, as well as the day-to-day routines of its priests and other friendly characters. Not every aspect of its living world was convincing, but Bethesda finessed the finer details over the course of the generation. By the time Fallout 3 was launched, stealth had become a nuanced spatial negotiation with enemy NPCs and voice actors were less obvious in their repetition across the wasteland. Oblivion's persuasion minigame, meanwhile, was jettisoned completely

"ASSASSIN'S CREED AND FAR CRY 2 REALLY SIGNALLED A SEA CHANGE IN THE KIND OF GAMES UBISOFT MAKE."

(an experiment best forgotten). Later came TES V: Skyrim, which for many remains the highest form of the open world RPG. Heaven for those with itchy feet.

Simultaneously, another star was rising: that of Ubisoft. The French publisher had funded the release of Far Cry, a beautiful yet unforgiving PC shooter that had pulled the genre out of the corridors of Doom and Quake and into the sunlight of the South Pacific. With the sequel, it went further, shifting from outdoor levels to a single 50km-square tract of African countryside.

1

2

While other PC developers had taken the FPS open world first – particularly ones based in Ukraine, where developers produced both STALKER (see p97) and Boiling Point: Road To Hell – Ubisoft was the first to do so in a polished, consistently playable fashion. Along with Assassin's Creed, which connected set-piece murders via horse rides through the Holy Land, Far Cry 2 redefined Ubisoft's identity.

KILLER CREATIONS

"When I was at Ubisoft in Montréal back between 2001 and 2010, we made linear story-driven action-adventure games," said the game's director, Clint Hocking, in a publisher-produced video about open world design. "Assassin's Creed and Far Cry 2 really signalled a sea change in the kinds of games Ubisoft make. It's a huge change culturally, it's a huge challenge for people to think about games and players differently, and to make that pivot with thousands of people around the world in less than five years is really amazing, actually."

Ubisoft wasn't foolish enough to assume it had got the formula right on the first try. Under Hocking, Far Cry 2 was designed to be hostile to its players – it battered them with malaria, jammed weapons, and enemy checkpoints that could never quite be wiped from the map.

Subsequent entries have been much more approachable, granting players unfettered, GTA-like freedom to steal helicopters and don wingsuits, without compromising the tactical stealth inherited from hardcore PC shooters. Every outpost became a self-contained puzzle box to be tackled in multiple possible ways, whether parachuting in from above, sniping from a clifftop vantage point, or sneaking through a gap in the fence in the dead of night. This punctuation proved to be an important influence on the open world games that followed in Far Cry's wake, creating pockets of challenge that caused you to slow down and assess your options.

Similarly, Assassin's Creed was smoothed and refined over time. The literal horseplay took a back seat to urban landscapes in historical settings. "Exploring GTA, my pleasure was just to be in this game world and see the sun rise," said original Assassin's Creed director Patrice Désilets in an interview with PC Gamer. "So it was like, 'Can we replace the car with the main character? In GTA I can go anywhere with the car, can I go anywhere with the character?' That's why we had the parkour."

3

4

1 Oblivion wasn't just an expansive world, it gave you real freedom in how you undertook your adventure with plenty of activities to lose yourself in. 2 Your ability to clamber up walls in Assassin's Creed was unprecedented for the time, an unparalleled act of exploration fidelity. 3 GTA IV wasn't all Rockstar had to offer on PS3. Red Dead Redemption made cowboy dreams a reality. 4 You can't talk about Far Cry 2 without mentioning its impressive fire – it's a game all about the interplay of systems.

Ubisoft's genius lay not just in perfecting its open world formula, but in boiling down its tenets to teach staff all over the planet. Before long, Ubisoft studios in cities as far apart as Toronto, Singapore, Quebec, Annecy, Shanghai, Chengdu, Kiev, Montpellier, and Bucharest were sharing responsibility for the expansion of the Assassin's Creed universe, delivering exquisitely recreated historical cities and vast explorable oceans on an annual basis, and players were keen to get stuck in and explore for themselves. The publisher had effectively industrialised the process of open world creation, and was reaping the rewards.

PLAYSTATION 4

The Witcher's wake

As Ubisoft grew into one of the most important games companies in the world, fellow triple-A publishers took note. Warner Bros funded Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor, which infused the Assassin's Creed formula with nemeses (enemies who remembered and learned from encounters with the player earlier in the game). Other copycats were less innovative – and with market saturation, inevitably, came fatigue. The open world genre was dominant, but for the first time, the public was tiring of its shtick.

Long after his departure from Ubisoft, Désilets jokingly apologised for popularising climbable towers, which players would typically scale to get a look at their surroundings and unlock new points of interest in the open world. Players regularly griped about maps filled with icons, which they felt were indicative of busywork and fed on an empty compulsion for completion. They had a point: the bite-sized activities that made up the bulk of many of these games had begun to feel more like breadcrumbs than meaningful and unique experiences. While developers were readily meeting the scale and art demands of open worlds, they were often failing to find enough substance to justify all that real estate.

"WELCOME TO SIDE-QUEST CITY, POPULATION: PRACTICALLY EVERYONE WHO OWNED A PS4."

Once again, RPGs provided the answer to the genre's problems. In 2015, a Polish developer named CD Projekt Red launched The Witcher 3. The studio had made its name through dense world building and dialogue that responded to player choice, over both the short and the long term. It applied the same approach to its debut open world, filling the Northern Realms not only with hidden treasure and enemy encampments, but interconnected questlines that deepened your relationship with its cast of colourful (and probably quite smelly) characters. Perhaps it was the overpowering pong, but players were unable to resist. In the years since, The Witcher 3 has sold 50 million copies.

1 Fortnite has become more freeform over time, offering a creative mode in which players can define the game rules of their own islands. 2 Death Stranding challenged our open world preconceptions with slow-paced trudging that rewarded forward planning. 3 Incredibly, The Witcher 3 was CD Projekt Red's first open world, one the studio has since followed up with Cyberpunk 2077. 4 No Man Sky's latest big update introduced vast interior spaces to match the endless outdoor universe.

HIT ON THE SIDE

Smartly, Ubisoft followed suit, swiftly turning Assassin's Creed into an open world RPG which merged stabby stealth with stats-driven combat and conversation. The results were surprisingly seamless, and seemed to quieten the criticism that had been building around the series.

The Witcher 3 left a permanent mark on Sony's catalogue of PlayStation exclusives, too. Guerrilla Games came out with Horizon Zero Dawn, its first new universe since Killzone, and a very different proposition to the venerable FPS series. Methodical battles with robotic dinosaurs aside, Horizon was an amalgam of Ubisoft's stealth takedowns and The Witcher's world building. Its narrative director, John Gonzalez, had been the lead writer on Fallout: New Vegas.

Soon afterwards, the former Resistance developers at Insomniac unveiled a new take on Spider-Man. While drawing on the mechanical foundations laid down by Treyarch on PS2, Marvel's Spider-Man also pulled

from the Witcher playbook, the devs pouring words and attention into every corner of its open world. Welcome to side-quest city, population: practically everyone who owned a PS4.

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

Across the same generation, an adjacent phenomenon was unfolding: Minecraft. Where triple-A teams were filling out their open words by hand, this indie smash relied on procedural generation to create random collections of hills, waterfalls, fissures, and cave networks. Made up of simply decorated cubes, yet oddly handsome, these worlds were unique to the players who generated them. And crucially, they were deformable. Every piece could be displaced and replanted as the foundations of a frontier homestead – a cosy shelter to block out the slavering giant spiders.

Thanks to Minecraft, PlayStation got No Man's Sky – a survival game set in a procedurally generated universe of unfathomable scale. As in Mojang's adventure, players mined for resources to improve their equipment, built bases, and learned about the ecosystem around them in order to master it. But they also flew in spaceships to new planets and explored a mystery connected to an entity called The Atlas. After a shaky start, in which tiny developer Hello Games struggled to live up to the hype it had conjured, No Man's Sky has become a fixture of the open world landscape. Its silhouette can now be seen in similarly controversial-yet-popular projects from much larger studios, such as Bethesda's Starfield and Ubisoft's Beyond Good And Evil 2.

Minecraft also gave us Fortnite, which Gears Of War creator Epic Games imagined would be a session-based co-op adventure about building castles and laying down traps to stave off waves of encroaching zombies. By the time it was released, though, a new early access phenomenon was on the rise – the battle royale, in the form of PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds. Better known as PUBG, the breakthrough PC shooter focussed the multiplayer survival genre using a single innovation: an ever-diminishing playspace. That shrinking circle guaranteed that every open world scramble for loot would end with a climactic, deathmatch-style clash between the would-be victors.

As it turned out, Epic was ideally placed to capitalise on this, having already developed open world tech in mimicry of Minecraft. Within months, it had reconfigured Fortnite as a PUBG clone, with the benefit of a friendly art style and those same castle construction mechanics. When it came to battle royale's final circle fights, on-the-fly building became an eye-catching USP. And with that, the games industry was forever changed.

PLAYSTATION 5

The battle royale for open world's future

Fortnite came out on top in the hundred-studio scrap for the battle royale crown, its runaway success firmly establishing open worlds as the new norm for multiplayer shooters. Behind the scenes, however, the game was helping many of Epic's peers as well. Since much of the games industry relies on Epic's Unreal Engine for development, they also benefitted from the studio's sophisticated open world tech.

In 2021, Epic released The Matrix Awakens on PS5. Starring Keanu Reeves and Carrie-Anne Moss, it was a showy tech demo that featured 16 square kilometres of shiny open world city, populated with realistic-looking people and traffic. It was made by a "relatively small team" using procedural generation tools, and Epic promised that other developers could do the same.

"PLAYER-LED EXPLORATION ON A LARGE SCALE IS NOW AN INGREDIENT IN MANY TYPES OF GAME."

"Using this workflow, you can modify the input rules and the whole city will change, redefined by those new instructions," they said at the time. "It means you can regenerate the entire city, right up until the last day of delivery, and continue to adjust and improve it. This opens up so many creative possibilities – and proves that any team can make a triple-A-game-quality open world, irrespective of size."

Advances in technology are already having a tangible impact on today's open worlds. By leaning on PS5's internal SSD, Insomniac turned the open world genre's most boring feature – fast travel – into a genuine thrill with Marvel's Spider-Man 2. Pick any spot in New York and Insomniac will instantly send Peter

Parker or Miles Morales swinging through the street you selected, no run-up required.

At the same time, the open world multiplayer of battle royale is still evolving. Its current form is the extraction shooter, a slower-paced, atmospheric take on squad-based exploration that more closely resembles the single-player likes of Far Cry than any deathmatch FPS. With Bungie and Call Of Duty's developers on board, there's every reason to suspect that PvP and open worlds will remain strongly entangled for the foreseeable future. Yet Rockstar will continue to lead the field, with the dominance of GTA Online still uncontested.

OPEN ALL AREAS

By this stage, it's beginning to feel reductive to call open world a genre. Player-led exploration on a large scale is now an ingredient in many different types of game – not just multiplayer shooting, but action adventure, stealth, survival, driving, and naval simulation. Its use has proliferated in every direction, and the medium is better for it.

On PlayStation especially, open world experiences are getting braver and stranger. The Decima engine which powers Guerrilla's Horizon games is also driving the Death Stranding series. There, Hideo Kojima and his team have played with the fundamentals of open worlds, making traversal actively difficult under the weight of piles of parcels – until you can build

1 Elden Ring took the FromSoftware formula of non-linear exploration and tough combat into a larger playspace, and was embraced by the public. 2 Marvel's Spider-Man 2's streets are filled just as convincingly as its rooftops, and you're able to flit between the two. 3 The world of Dragon's Dogma 2 is one that exists just outside your control, which frustrates some players. 4 The Matrix Awakens isn't a full game, but a showcase of what freeroaming city games could be in the future.

motorways to connect your destinations, that is.

Then there's Elden Ring, in which the cruelty of combat makes exploring the intricately crafted, lore-rich environment a constant battle, and Dragon's Dogma 2, which makes fast travel deliberately arduous. Either you save up for teleportation stones, which are expensive, or take an oxcart, leaving yourself exposed to attacks by goblins or griffins, which might smash your chosen mode of transport to bits.

Right now, there's a debate raging in the gaming community about the future of open worlds. The question is this: how much friction do we want along with our freedom? In all likelihood, the industry won't definitively commit to one side or the other. Instead, it'll continue to stretch and bend the definition of open worlds, coming up with new twists to bring to different audiences. You can bet, though, that developers will still build mountains. And if we like, we can climb them. ■

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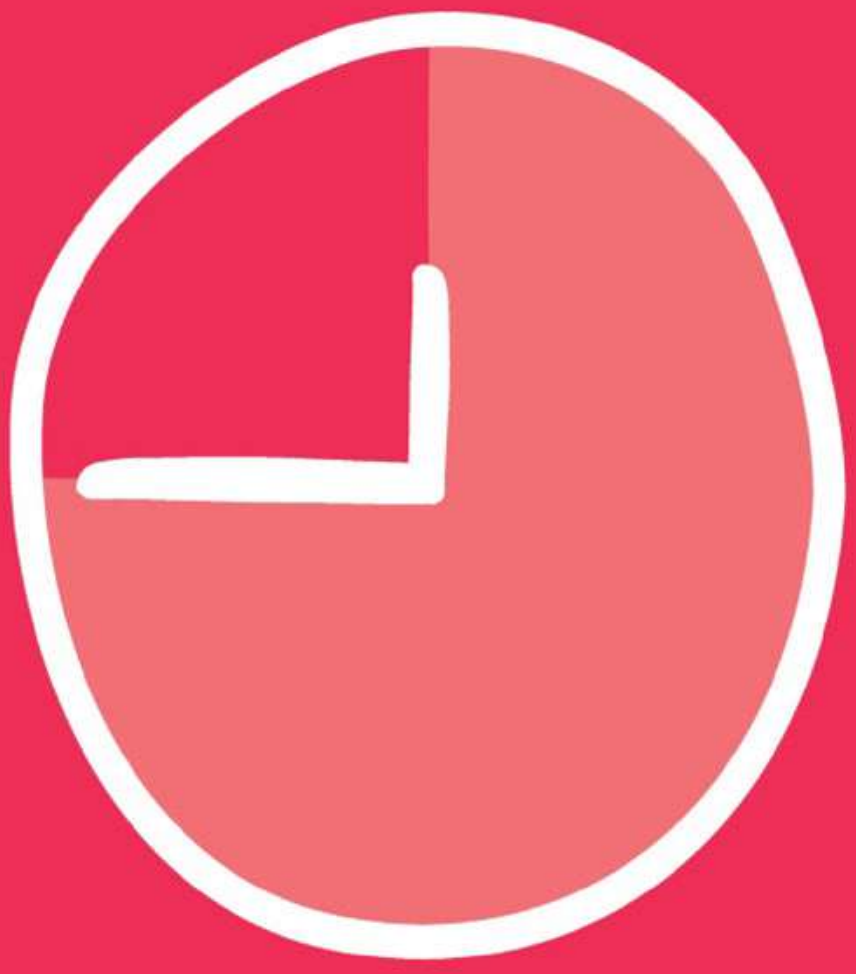

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GOLD AWARD PLAY

Dragon's Dogma 2

Our heart has been stolen

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £59.99
ETA Out now
PUB Capcom
DEV Capcom
PLAYERS 1 (with social features)
LENGTH 50+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Remappable buttons; run toggle/hold; optional motion sensor controls; various camera adjustments; subtitles (with background options); ability to hire powerful allies

Greetings, traveller. Have you heard the tale of the adventurer who spent a whole day levitating from balcony to balcony in the capital of Vernworth, looting chest after chest? Or of the one who fought off a legion of lizard-like saurians by flinging the corpses of their scaly comrades back at them? Or of the one who rode a minotaur off a cliff and into the salty clutches of the forbidden brine?

Dragon's Dogma 2 is an open world adventure like little else. At a glance the map might make you think of the likes of Assassin's Creed or Elden Ring, but in truth this is more of a dynamic sandbox, designed so you can be let loose on the world to discover your own adventure. After your heart is stolen by a dragon, you're declared the prophesied Arisen, destined to face the drake in battle to save the kingdom – but the journey to that battle, how you build your strength and skills, and how you help (or indeed, don't) the people you meet on the way is a journey you can call your own. You'll be eager to share anecdotes of both your adventures and misadventures with friends, with no two players' quests ever being quite alike.

WINGING IT

One early quest prompts you to sneak into a castle at night without drawing the attention of the guards. When they reach this point, one member of Team PLAY dresses as a noble ready for the masquerade, then plays a game of Metal Gear Solid vision-cone avoidance to progress past that area. Another of us finds a set of guard's gear and puts it on, passing themself off as one of the castle's defenders. Another simply walks into the castle (permissible by the light of day), finds a corner near to the room that will unlock come nighttime, and waits for their opportunity.

If you think something might work, then more often than not it will. For instance, is a quest-giver after a rare item you'd rather not give up, or are there two after the same trinket? A shifty shop owner may be able to assist by creating flawed yet passable replicas. Need to uncover someone's secret? Every NPC has a schedule through the

There's only one true dragon. One of few articulate monsters, they're a foreboding foe.

> You'll be eager to share anecdotes of both your adventures and misadventures.

Unlike Vermund, pawns in Battahl are treated harshly, and dark experiments to replicate the Arisen's power to command them are conducted in the shadows.

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1 Our Beasten Arisen, the orange-furred G'har Feld. 2 Cable carts enable you to avoid some monsters, but it's a long way down if a harpy grabs you while you're mid-journey. 3 The Sphinx's riddles play with Dragon's Dogma 2's own deep systems to sadistic effect. The moment before it passes judgement is truly terrifying. 4 Magik Archer's lock-on feels rather like an arcade shooter.

constantly progressing days and nights, so hang back, see where they go, and you may learn something. Killing someone and then using a rare recovery item to bring them back to life – either where they stood or by tracking their corpse to a city's morgue – can be a viable solution.

Even quests that offer waypoints are highlighting points of interest rather than dictating the only way to progress. You may uncover multiple ways to, say, gain passage through a gate. But think outside the box and there may be other, albeit more dangerous, ways to circumvent a roadblock entirely. What's more, core features unlock at different paces. While new vocation classes to unlock are eventually marked on the map, it's possible to stumble into some of these early on if you nose around. How you solve puzzles can vary both the reward and the way events in the world play out, from one knock-on effect allowing you essentially to skip a later challenge by obtaining a special permit to another providing more information about the world's constant cycle of dragon-and-Arisen enmity.

The Mystic Spearhand's zippy combat evokes Devil May Cry, with the ability to unload cinematic finishing moves on enemies caught unawares.

ELF AND SAFETY

Certain quests clearly progress the story, with your Arisen eventually travelling from Vermund to the neighbouring kingdom of Battahl. But the boundary between mainline and optional quests is often blurred, to the point where we're really not sure which quests, if indeed many at all, need to be completed to progress.

That said, as everything feeds back into the narrative you'll want to wring everything you can out of quests. We can't imagine not befriending Glendwyr, an elf we see eying up human-made bows in Vernworth. After we assist him in his archery trial, he shows us a secret route to an elf settlement and (thanks in part to another ally who can translate Elvish) grow closer to more of its inhabitants in a way that rings all the way through to the moments before we hit credits, tens of hours after the fact. Yet it also seems like someone could forgo doing any of that at all.

As for our translator? That's a pawn with the Woodland Wordsmith skill. Your duty as Arisen makes you one of a kind… in your world. But there are many versions of that world out there, all with their own Arisen, and each of those has created a pawn to serve as an ally – an NPC who can switch classes, and is able to share information they've learned about the world after adventuring beyond the rift. Two more can join you from other players (simultaneously existing in both versions of the world), meaning pawns are constantly learning from adventures they've had with other players. They may tell you of nearby treasure or caves, or give you hints for your current quest. One quest to find a particular NPC has us stumped for ages, before one newly recruited pawn makes a suggestion that puts us on the right track. No mere contrivance, the pawns' world-hopping abilities even becomes a major part of the plot, systems and narrative joining elegantly together.

The social teamups are just another way your adventure will become personal, as your group of pawns will tweak your experience. While your own pawn levels up, recruited ones don't (unless you recruit them again after they've grown further while venturing through their host world), giving you an incentive to keep employing new faces. You can even spend a special currency earned by interacting with the pawn system to recruit those of a higher level than you to assist with tricky encounters – though if someone is on your friends list, it's free to recruit their pawn.

Common encounters can become perilous, memorable fights to the death in an instant.

The composition of your party matters as well. A mage can come in handy thanks to a host of healing spells, but it's just as viable to go with a full team of archers to pepper foes with arrows before they can draw near. Tactics, too, can be observed and learned by pawns. Grab enemies and throw them at others for big damage, and pawns may pick up that this is a clever thing to do with foes and start doing it themselves.

Ulrika proves an early ally in Melve – check back in on her and you'll uncover one of the game's very best stories.

CAVE KNAVES

No matter which quests you take on, you're constantly drawn into the massive open world. Broadly speaking, Vermund is a grassy land of forests and Battahl an arid, craggy region, but many more biomes are elegantly placed between in hidden corners. You might fight across cliff-side paths above crashing waves, tentatively step through a foggy land plagued with the undead that removes the mini-map, or simply follow a side-road deeper into the trees.

You regularly stumble upon things of interest off the beaten path. Caves litter the world, taking you from the wide-open outside world into more intricately designed areas. As they vary massively in scope and design, you never know what to expect when you venture inside, flicking your lantern on to light the way in the dark. It could be a simple monster den with some loot, or it could be a more complex tomb with lightweight puzzles.

One has us hunting for glowing crystals that wither when lantern light falls upon them, meaning we have to put up with the darkness if we want to stuff them into our pockets. Another has us fighting through zombies, tossing aside the corpses of ones about to explode with a foe-flinging class skill and fist-bumping our pawn when the undead are vanquished, then uncovering a rare piece of gear… only to realise the path we took has been flooded by an even bigger legion of the undead. Whether it's equipment or simply lots of ore to scoop up, everything you find can be valuable as you can use most materials to give boosts to gear or sell it to fund the purchase of many expensive items – fast travel stones, for instance, cost a rather hefty sum of gold.

Aside from caves, you may run head-first into anything from a cyclops attack to a griffin descending to interrupt a fight with some goblins. Common encounters can become perilous, memorable fights to the death in an instant. Fail to finish off the griffin fast enough and it flees, retaining damage taken for when it swoops back in later. You can also find special rift stones offering the opportunity to recruit valuable pawns, or come across those pawns while you're wandering the world, or on repeatable quests. Many of the latter are escort missions, which are really quite annoying thanks to AI that frequently gets

1 Any enemies can be grabbed and thrown when stunned or downed. Mystic Spearhand can do this for all enemies and objects in an area – including corpses! **2** Travelling merchants often carry nifty gear. They make stop offs in settlements, or find them wandering. **3** Charge! Though your pawns are NPCs, they nonetheless begin to feel like a real party, with plenty of jibes and quips as they talk to one another as well.

stuck or distracted by relatively distant groups of enemies (and the rewards for completing these missions are somewhat lacking). Fortunately your pawns' pathing works better, thanks in part due to their desire to stick close to you and rubber-banding if they do wander too far away. But it can still grate when they get stuck on a cliffside while you're getting bashed to pieces by an ogre metres away, or they trip into instant-death water instead of hopping across a gap you navigated easily (at one moment that appears to be part of a main quest's primary path, all three of our pawns tumble in one by one – a rare, but no less frustrating, occurrence).

OXED IN

This world is littered with enemies, and you spend a tremendous amount of time fighting. Limited fast travel means you can spend a lot of time retreading the same routes – and with little variance in what groups appear where, it can get exhausting to do the same things over and over, even if encounters become more trivial as you grow more powerful.

You can use the rare and expensive ferrystones to teleport to certain points, many of them chosen by your own hand by placing extremely rare portcrystals (which you can pick back up and replace as you wish) – but they're not so scarce that we wouldn't recommend using them quite liberally.

Ox carts, meanwhile, offer a compromise within the limited fast travel mechanics, linking settlements and giving you the option to 'doze off' and effectively reach your destination instantly, while also risking having to wake up for a scrap along the way. Annoyingly, as if made of matchsticks, these carts can be blown to bits by enemies near-instantly, meaning you have to travel the rest of the way on foot. Sometimes this is a blessing, as you may end up shaken awake near an area warranting further exploration. Otherwise there's no way to hop off a cart between destinations, unless you sit there as it slowly winds from point to point (while also being expected to fight every one of the encounters while on the road).

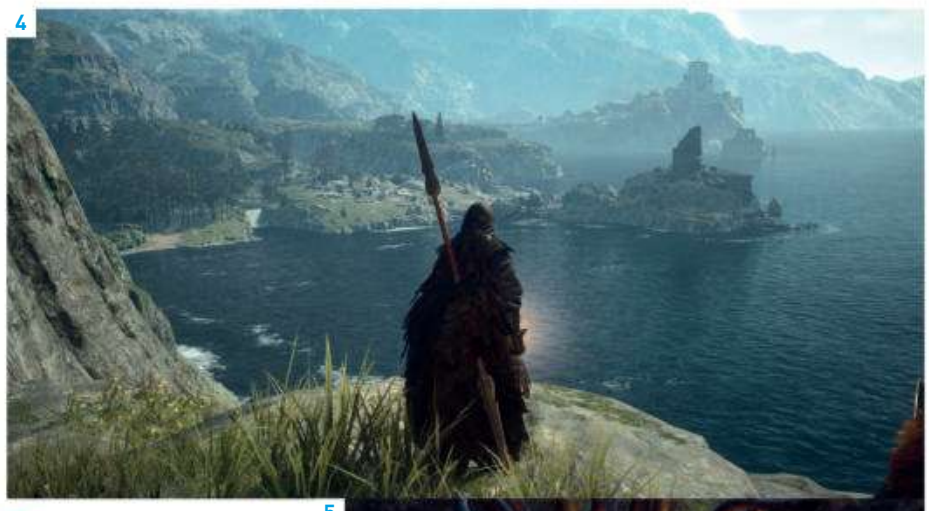
It respects you enough to let you off the leash, and allows you to have your own adventure.

It takes a couple of in-game days for enemies and materials to respawn, meaning sometimes a trek back to a destination can simply be a case of managing your stamina as you sprint back along empty roads.

BACK AGAIN

But for all that monotony, Dragon's Dogma 2 offers twice as much thrilling discovery as many open worlds, delivering plenty of enjoyable friction alongside engaging exploration. Pushing forward, choosing when to rest at camp or when to risk another fight, feels consistently tactical and rewarding.

Tussles with huge foes can be punishing – but Elden Ring this is not. Besides being able to fight alongside strong pawns, you accrue a lot of instant revival items, as many health potions as you can carry, and frequent autosaves that mean you can reload right before your death most of the time. And you too can simply kick arse. The scale of some enemies, and the



4 Few open worlds feel so well realised, with such a tangible sense of space. 5 Certain enemies have special tactics. Maybe don't look at this one. 6 Nobody to speak Elvish? Even the settlement's menus will be in the language.

ability to crawl over them, peppering them with stabs or pocket explosives, may take cues from Capcom's Monster Hunter series, but the combat also tips its hat to Devil May Cry through awesome combos that let you wreak havoc as you reach higher levels. The new Mystic Spearhand leans into this, allowing you to use a projectile to slow down enemies and then twirl your double-handed blade around for a continuous onslaught. Hit them in a vital spot and you can melt the health bar of even a massive foe in moments. Similarly, one of the final bosses can lose almost all of its health instantly with a well-planned shot of the Magick Archer's most powerful move.

Switching classes is easy to do, and highly recommended. You'll max them out quickly, and obtain augmenting buffs that can be equipped to other classes as well. We have such a ball playing each one, from zapping enemies from a distance as a sorcerer to getting stuck in sword-and-shield-style as a fighter, that we keep wanting to stick with them until we're tempted away by another box of toys. There are so many skills to mix and match that within those classes alone there can be enormous playstyle variety.

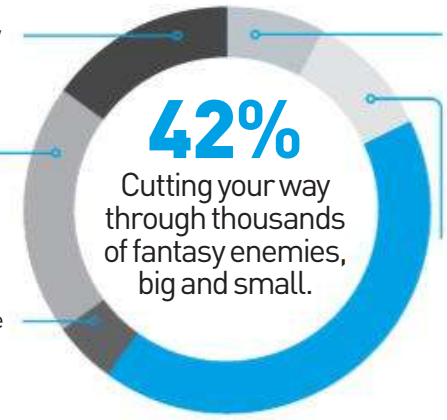
This is a game that's able to bend so much, but never breaks. A sandbox to play in, it offers plenty of systems ready to exploit, with a level of tactility that becomes easy to simply intuit. Most of all, it respects you enough to let you off the leash to have your own adventure – and what evokes a sense of play better than that?

An unforgettable adventure that you can call your own, littered with amazing discoveries, laugh-out-loud tussles, and so much more just off the beaten path. Oscar Taylor-Kent

9 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: DRAGON'S DOGMA 2



15% Trying a new vocation and finding a new instant favourite.

20% Taking your time picking apart just how to deal with quest-givers' requests.

5% Getting a little tired of running down the same pathways.

8% Chuckling at the physics at work when you're sent flying through the air.

10% Turning a corner to find something new, and maybe a little scary too.

HOW TO... BEST THE SPHINX

You can't fail once. These riddles require a lot of input too, so the best advice is to be on top of systems. Talk to NPCs to add them to your History, keep track of collectibles you find, and think outside the box. If you want to be sly, you can make cloud saves manual as a back up.

SECOND OPINION PAWN STAR

Where to begin? I could tell you about the time I stumbled upon a sleeping dragon. I could say how upon reuniting with a pawn they decried their bad luck at having to suffer my company twice. I could tell you about the time another pawn offered to show the way – only to lead us into a fog-shrouded place where we were set upon by skeletons. I *could*, but here lies a legend worth forging yourself. **Jess Kinghorn**

LOVING/HATING

NATURE CALLS
From grass reacting to the beating of a griffin's wings to being hurled around by tornado magic, there's a real tangibility to DD2's world.

ROYAL ALBERT
And a royal pain in the bum. We hate this man, and will not elaborate further. But we're sure you'll grow to hate him too.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

The first DD is a classic, but rougher around the edges – everything in DD2 is more refined.

Elden Ring's bosses are spectacular, but Dragon's Dogma 2's open world is much better to explore.

It's close, but Spyro: Reignited Trilogy's dragon men can't match the mystique of DD2's rift walker.

When you win a fight, you're left in no doubt about the outcome. Ooh, messy!

Rise Of The Ronin

Proof that Ninja Gaiden wasn't merely a flash in Japan

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £69.99
ETA Out now
PUB Koei Tecmo
DEV Team Ninja
PLAYERS 1 (offline), 2-3 (online)
LENGTH 25-35 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Extensive, inc customisable HUD, controls, and vibration; adjustable UI colours; swappable stick functions; adjustable walk/run speed, map cursor speed, and hold time for button input; hold/toggle for controls; auto lock-on, auto combos, and aim assist on/off; auto grab, auto crouch, and auto item collection on/off; adaptive triggers on/off; adjustable camera and aim speeds; adjustable subtitles

Sword fights that demand skill and patience, historical authenticity (to a degree), apparently effortless decapitations that are equal parts horrific and hilarious… whatever you want from a game featuring samurai, there's a chance it's in here somewhere. There are some undeniably shonky elements, sure, yet they melt into the charm.

Writing on the PlayStation Blog at the end of 2023, Team Ninja's Fumihiko Yasuda described Rise Of The Ronin as "Our biggest game to date", and as we play we see that this can be interpreted in multiple ways. The obvious interpretation, of map size, certainly applies. Taking place in late 19th-century Japan, in the final years of samurai and ronin, the story is spread across three areas of the country: Yokohama; Edo (renamed Tokyo shortly after the events of the story); and Kyoto. Each is a large map full of missions, buildings, fields, people, and areas that you'll only see a fraction of if you pinball between story missions.

It's also the developer's biggest game in terms of storytelling scope. It's set during a very specific period in Japanese history, when discontent with the ruling shogunate – and specifically the way that it handled dealings with Western governments – provoked widespread discontent, and eventually civil war. The more we look into this period of Japan's history, the more impressed we become with Team Ninja's attention to detail, and its ability to blend historical facts into its action game. There aren't many games where studying the history of 19th-century Japan can mean stumbling into story spoilers, but this is certainly one of the few.

YOU'RE BEING HISTORICAL

Some facts and events are necessarily tweaked and twiddled with in order to make for a better game.

There aren't many games where studying 19th-century Japan can mean stumbling into story spoilers.

Send a pilgrim dog out with cash, and it'll wander off for a while before returning with goodies for you. We'd be happy to see these critters even without the loot.

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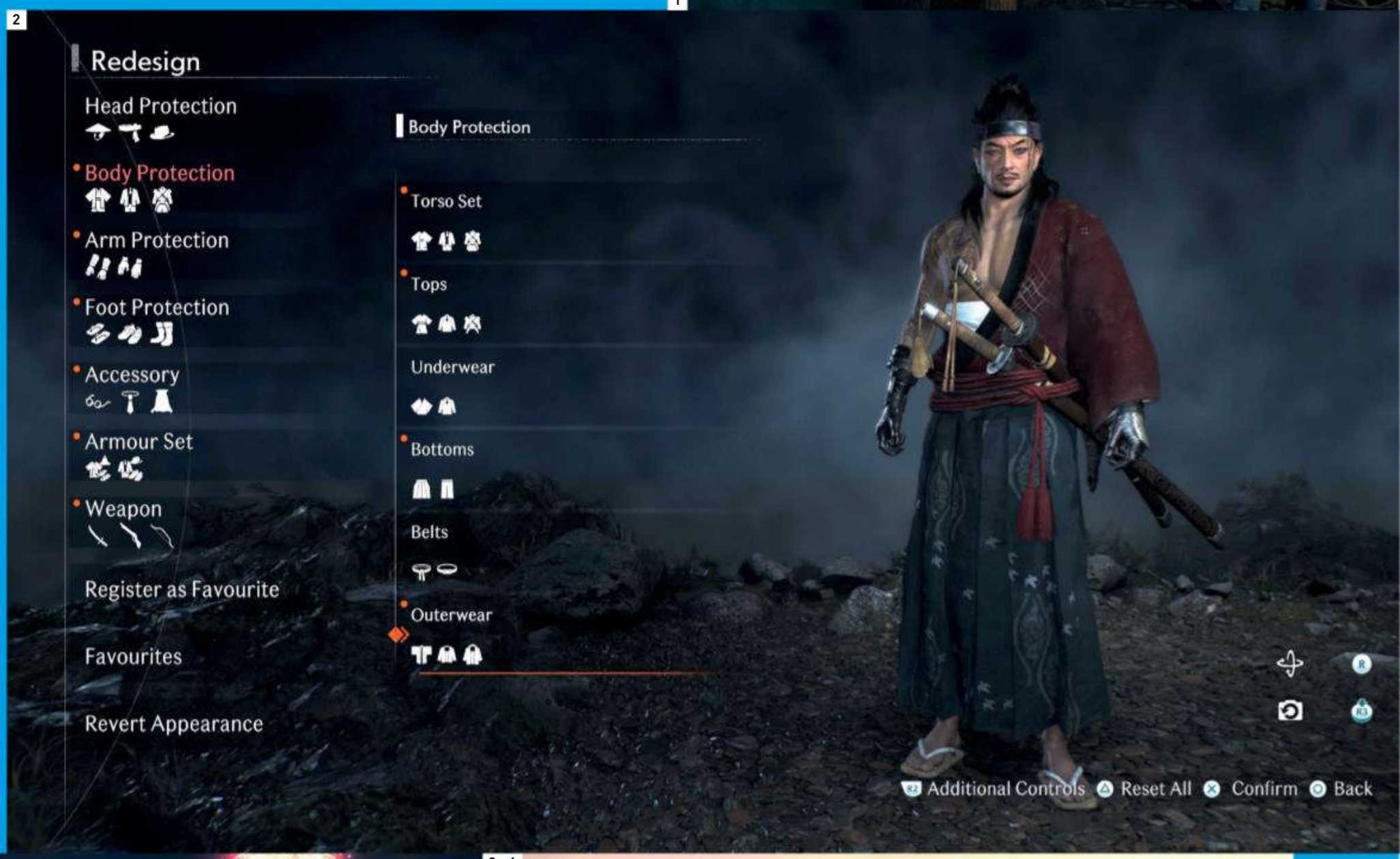

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1 Weapons carry various minor buffs in addition to their main attack stat. 2 You can equip one piece of kit while giving it the appearance of another. We believe the kids call this 'transmog'. 3 Enjoy the fireworks section while it lasts; this type of visual flair isn't seen elsewhere in the game. 4 We like the glider, but the potential's been wasted due to its refusal to stay airborne for very long.

This is often to accommodate the presence of your ronin, just about the only major character in the game who can't be found in the history books. You can customise their presentation to a surprising degree (even after you start playing, if you wish), right down to the tone of their voice, not that they usually have very much to say. They tend to be the strong, silent type.

There's character levelling, but this isn't the drawback that it so often tends to be. We find that we manage to stay ahead of recommended mission levels, without even trying, right up until the climactic fight. Weapons and gear are assigned levels too, each item having its own stat boosts which, after a point, can be swapped between pieces. Legendary gear offers extra benefits if you equip a whole set, although we prefer to mix and match, keeping those numbers high.

There is a variety of weapon types, and the historical angle of the gradual Westernisation of Japan also bleeds in here. There are katanas and oxtail blades, but also bayonets, spears, and sabres. You might take out enemies from a distance with a bow for stealth, or with an American rifle for power. You earn weapon proficiency as you fight, one reason that we tend to stick with the same few weapons (dual blades backed up by a sword big enough to surf on).

The core combat experience is, simply put, one of the best sword-to-sword systems out there, simple yet demanding. At a fundamental level, counters are the key to success. You can block, you can dodge, but knocking your opponent's weapon away at the precise moment that they strike gives you a brief but important advantage. A successful 'counterspark' reduces the enemy's maximum Ki (stamina) and makes them panic temporarily, leaving them open to attack.

SPARK LIFE

Conversely, you want to keep a close eye on your own Ki bar at all times. If it runs out you won't be able to act, leaving you utterly helpless for a few seconds – and a few seconds is all your opponent will need to slice huge chunks off your health bar. This is where the 'blood gauge' comes in. As you land successful hits, your weapon becomes bloodied. A quick tap of L1 immediately after an attack shakes the blood off and restores an amount of Ki proportionate to the amount of blood built up. Ki is required for everything in combat – attacking, blocking, dodging, counters – so maintaining it, and choosing your actions carefully but quickly, is crucial.

Another layer to combat is the use of stances. There are a number of stances in the game that run on a rock-paper-scissors system, with the vast majority conferring either an advantage or disadvantage against another. The most important aspect of this is the ease with which you're able to counter. Fortunately – and a huge reason why combat is challenging rather than infuriating – each opponent is accompanied by a little icon displaying your current stance's relationship to theirs. See that dreaded red downwards arrow? Switch to another stance with your current weapon, or swap to another with a stance that works to your advantage. Switching between stances is a little awkward, requiring you to glance at the corner of the screen to see which one of those available is best, but we can forgive that.

Each historic character you meet follows the life events of their real-life counterpart to some degree. Taka Murayama is no exception.

A combat system that punishes button bashing, and rewards careful play with an adrenaline rush.

The end result is a combat system that ruthlessly punishes button bashing, and rewards careful play with an adrenaline rush of satisfaction each and every time you make it sing your tune. Countering a powerful attack indicated by the traditional videogame red glow, and/or a series of attacks in rapid succession, is tricky – but *immensely* pleasing to get right and follow up with some devastating swipes of your own. You'll always know that you earned it, too, as different enemies with different weapons will have varying speeds and rhythms of attack to dance with.

OH THE HILT

And when the fight is over? When you finish your enemy off? When it comes to nameless grunts, the kills are wonderfully brutal. Blades through the chest, heads spinning through the air, torsos waving goodbye to legs... you can turn the gore off if it's a bit much for you, but it's so gleefully over-the-top, we find it impossible to be grossed out.

As this is a Team Ninja game, you may now be worrying that it's usually going to be *your* head that takes a tumble, but fear not; this is also the studio's biggest game in terms of the audience it's appealing to. There are three difficulties to choose from, and you can switch between them during the game at checkpoints. The highest will satisfy those who relish the traditional Team Ninja challenge, and the lowest is probably equivalent to 'normal' for most developers, in that you'll be presented with a challenge without suspecting that your PS5 actively hates you.

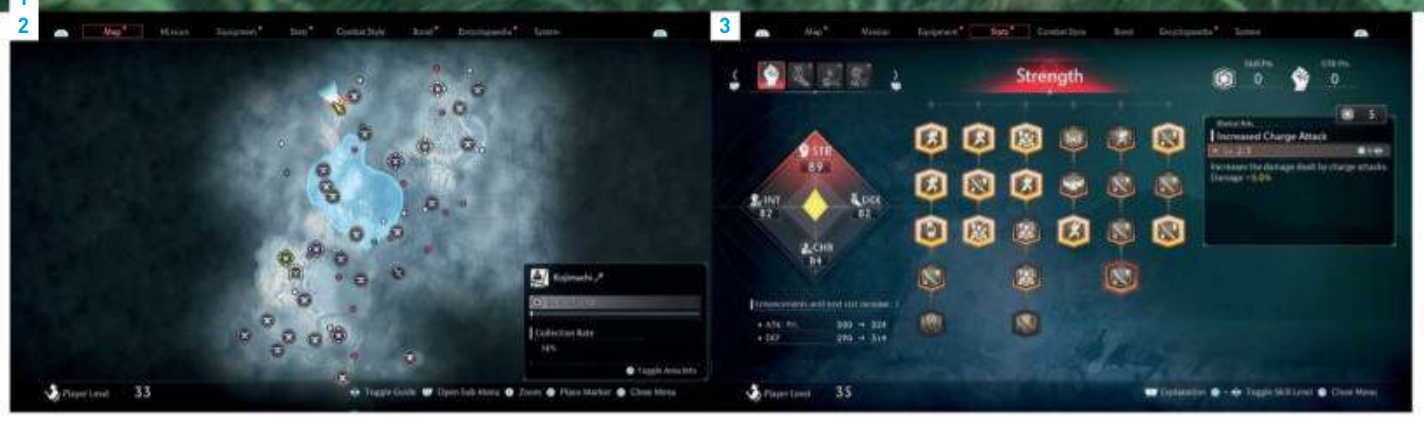
This is the developer's take on an open world experience, though, so it's not a constant onslaught of intense combat. There's a heavy emphasis on story with plenty of dialogue, most of it spoken by famous figures from Japanese history. You're introduced very early on to Ryoma Sakamoto, who accompanies you for much of the main story and many side-missions. His depiction here seems to be somewhat more relaxed and less politically active than the real Sakamoto was, but the important thing is that he's a memorable and likeable character.

There are some instantly familiar open world tropes. Some areas will be under enemy control until you've sliced up enemies in certain spots, and you're rewarded with gear and new missions for your trouble. People will call out to you as you pass, offering side-missions. There are bonus activities to chase down, such as taking photos of certain areas and finding cats. You're never forced through any of this before being allowed to progress the story, though. You're always in control of how much or how little you stray off course, and that's a big ol' tick in our book.

WEST END SHOGUN

There are some clear signs that this is made by a team used to creating more linear experiences, in ways both good and bad. One huge plus is that the flow of play is little short of

Rise Of The Ronin's Ryoma Sakamoto is brave, loyal, and something of a ladies' man.



1 In case you were wondering, yes, you can drop from the glider straight onto your horse if you time the call right. 2 We love the proliferation of fast travel spots on the map, but finding anything specific not marked as a mission objective can be a challenge. 3 The upgrade tree for your character is pretty self-explanatory. Keep a careful eye on the split between general and specific skill points for buffs, though.

immaculate. We've already mentioned that there's no forced funnelling through side-activities, but there's also an overarching determination to keep things going at pace. The maps are large, but there are no attempts to emphasise this by placing objectives miles apart – or, at least, no great distances to cover at an agonisingly slow speed.

It's not long before we're given our first horse, who we can summon like a carrot-loving genie at almost any time. Combined with the fact that fast travel spots are scattered with great generosity across every map, we find that no journey ever feels like a chore. There are other traversal options, but these are implemented with significantly less success.

You've probably seen the glider (given to you very early on) and, while it's useful in certain situations, it tends to plummet to the ground within seconds, feeling about as aerodynamic as a television set. Fun when launched from a great height, useful for little other than making a big jump otherwise. Then… there's the grappling hook. Oh, this could have been so good. It *should* have been so good. It's occasionally useful in combat for hurling explosive barrels or interrupting enemies, but outside of fights, it can only be used on nominated bits of scenery. We appreciate that the freedom to attach it anywhere would doubtless have thrown up plenty of level and combat design headaches, but we can't help but be disappointed.

When the hook *does* come into play, it's often to support a stealthy approach. There are no instafail stealth sections (phew!), but it's sometimes an option. Stalking enemies from rooftops can be fun, especially once we've unlocked the ability to use the hook to yank them up from the ground to take them out. Stealth is great when it works, but its implementation feels rather half-hearted.

You're always in control of how much or how little you stray off course – a big tick in our book.

HOOK ME UP

Sometimes we'll clear a room or an area quickly and quietly in seconds, picking off a straggler or two before rapidly assassinating the few remaining enemies. More often than not, though, it's simply not possible to take out more than a few enemies in this way. There might be too much open space beside our hiding spot, or – and this happens fairly often – an enemy will be placed with their back to the wall directly facing the only entrance, impossible to sneak up on. Allies will sometimes stumble into breakable objects, too, making a hilarious amount of noise that, luckily, enemies are unable to hear. And yes, okay, sometimes we do that too.

Ah, the allies. You're rarely alone, most missions giving you two characters to fight alongside (you can eventually choose who to bring along as you develop relationships with more characters). This is another way in which the game is more forgiving than a traditional Team Ninja experience. AI fighters make themselves useful, you can switch between characters during a mission, and you'll automatically do so when your current character is

4 He'll never know what hit him (it's our grappling hook). 5 Growing closer to allies can translate to stance upgrades and other benefits. 6 Your choices can trigger an alternate mission or cutscene, but the story largely stays the same.

defeated. You only fail the mission if all three characters die before you get a chance to revive someone (and there are *checkpoints*!).

While you can't explore the open world or share side-activities with other players, you can play missions with one or two others, with AI dropping in or out as needed. We didn't get much time to test this out before deadline, but what we do play works as smoothly as you'd hope. There's no denying that (good) human allies are far more effective than AI ones, too, so it's a good option if you find yourself struggling.

Back on the subject of difficulty, if you're a Team Ninja fan worrying that it sounds like this is a step down in challenge (which it isn't, if you go for the highest difficulty available at the start), note that a *fourth* difficulty is made available once you've completed the story, which also offers a higher tier of gear to be had. We'll just say this: returning to the first area of the game, we find that many of the Midnight-difficulty enemies can kill us in one or, at best, two hits.

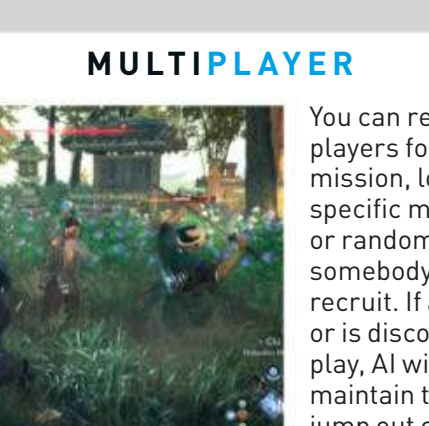
Is there room for improvement here? Absolutely. Stealth could do with tweaking, traversal options could do with smoothing around the edges, navigating the world map in the menu is a touch confusing, and we would like to see more time spent discussing the human cost of war (it's there, but only just). However, a superb combat system and a fascinating fusion of historical storytelling and open-world adventure more than make up for that.

An open-world game that harnesses the tight pace of Team Ninja's previous adventures. Smart storytelling that balances historical accuracy with narrative flexibility. **Luke Kemp**

8
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: RISE OF THE RONIN



20% Stumbling into ne'er-do-wells and taking care of them. Permanently.

8% Petting the cats and dogs that you find. Come here little guy!

5% Thinking about the boss who can magically hover in mid-air.

24% Swinging between yells of victory and wails of despair while countering an opponent

3% Traversing the open world. It never takes long to reach the next objective.

HOW TO... GAMBLE LIKE A PRO

The gambling minigame is simple (guess if the next number will be odd or even), but cheaters can increase your winnings. Work out the pattern to identify the cheater, and piggyback to profit. Alternatively, call out the crooked dealer if you fancy a swift and violent end to the game.

THE DUALSENSE DIFFERENCE

HAPTIC FEEDBACK
Combat is given an extra edge with subtle haptic feedback, as is riding your horse through the open world.

HAPTIC FEEDBACK
Even cutscenes benefit, with details such as footsteps on a wooden floor or a friendly pat on the shoulder felt.

MULTIPLAYER

You can recruit other players for your current mission, look for a specific mission to join, or randomly join somebody looking to recruit. If a player leaves or is disconnected during play, AI will jump in to maintain the numbers (or jump out of the action if somebody joins).

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Replay a mission in a previous map (and therefore time), and the shiny is yours.

SILVER
Track down every last cat for this one. They'll be marked on your map. Feline lucky?

GOLD
Beat a ronin mission on the postgame Midnight difficulty to earn this.

Harold can't even get respect from kids.

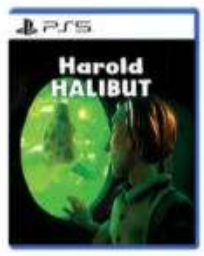
Harold Halibut

Under the sea, under the sea, it's still the '70s

To escape the Cold War and the destruction of all life on Earth, the enterprising passengers of the spaceship Fedora set out for the stars to begin hunting for a new planet. Over 200 years later, the Fedora, which had ended up sinking into an alien ocean, receives word that actually… Earth is sort of… okay? However, many of the people now on board know no home other than the Fedora, among them the game's protagonist, humble ship's janitor Harold Halibut.

Harold is a simple soul. If you wanted to be less nice, you could call him a dweeb, an airhead, not the strongest of characters. But given the Fedora is a spaceship the size of a small city, Harold's crucial to people's everyday lives, even if they can't see it. As janitor he mostly cleans the ship's filters and runs errands as assistant to Dr Mareaux, an elderly scientist trying to get the ship back to Earth before they miss their launch window.

Harold's quiet life gets shaken up when he finds an alien in the water filter, and it might just hold the answer to the Fedora's propulsion problems. More importantly, for Harold, this alien shows him that there is more to life – more to the Fedora even – than scrubbing graffiti off walls and eating at the Fish Fish Fish Hut for every meal, and that's before we even get to the conspiracy driven by the All Water Corporation, responsible for most public services on the ship, and the secret society dedicated to stopping it.



INFO

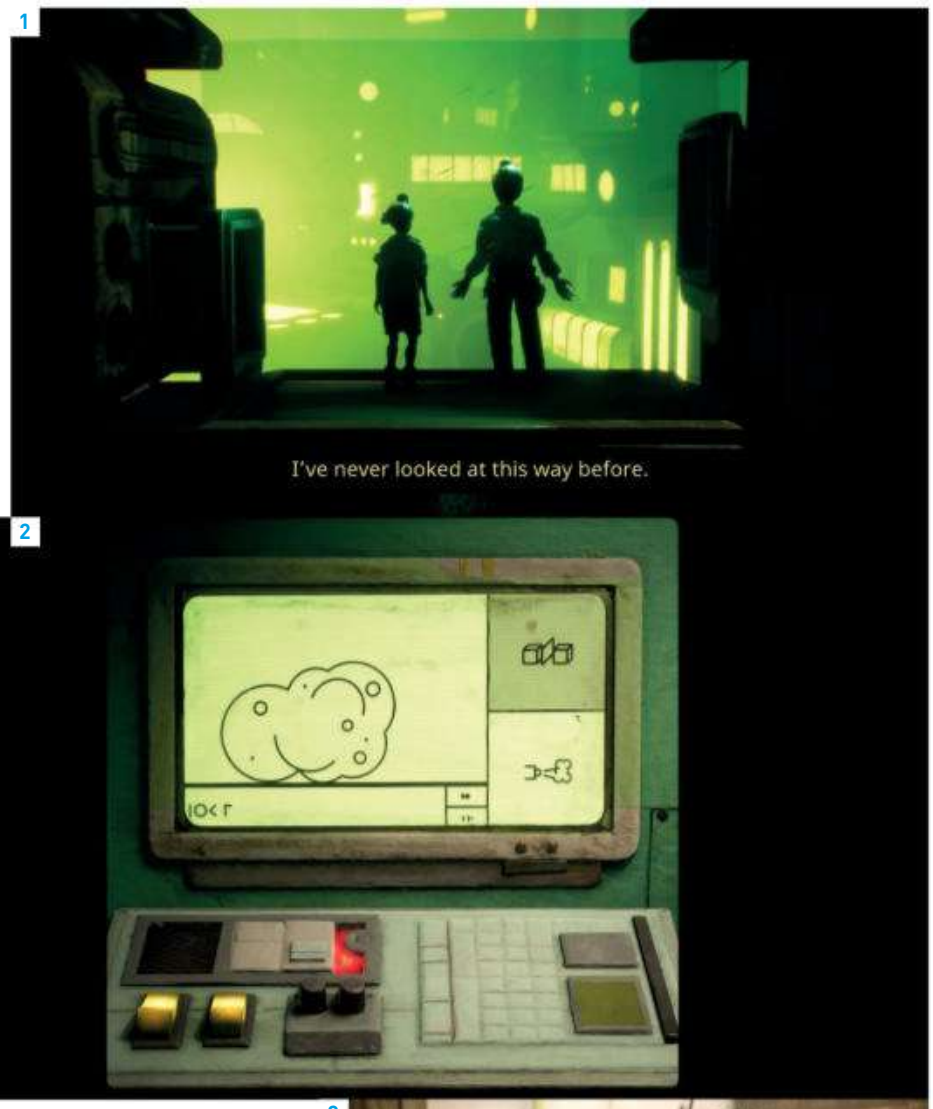
FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE TBC
ETA Out now
PUB Slow Bros
DEV Slow Bros
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 15-20 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitle size toggle

TROUTER SPACE

Before we talk any more about Harold, we need to talk about the most astounding thing about the game he stars in. Harold Halibut took over a decade to make, in part because it is a completely hand-crafted stop-motion adventure, meaning every character, every plate, every hallway has been sculpted from plasticine, 3D scanned, and animated, not unlike Wallace & Gromit. Of course, everyone also wears hand-stitched clothing and puts up tiny hand-painted art in their tiny homes. It is, quite frankly, a marvel, and an amount of work that's mind-boggling to consider. The Fedora is a beautiful array of '60s décor, complete with funky elevator music and TV ads for the only two shops in 'town', inhabited by a small but diverse cast of characters Harold can slowly befriend over the course of the game.

As far as the story goes, things don't get dark – which is good, given its appealing looks. The game comes across as quite philosophical at times when Harold is trying to figure himself out, but players of all ages will be able to enjoy it. The dialogue and acting in is fantastic; each character has their own worries and it's satisfying to get to know them and help them, whether it's postman Buddy who delivers

> **Every character, every plate, every hallway has been sculpted, 3D scanned, and animated.**



1 There's a lot of beauty to discover aboard the Fedora, and around it. **2** Harold gets to perform janitorial duties via diverting minigames. They're okay. **3** There's convincing-sounding science talk, which we have no means to verify.

all letters with a same-day guarantee or Captain-At-Large Zoya, who hasn't done a whole lot of captaining since the Fedora sank. The writing can genuinely make you squeeze away a tear or two at some points – this is a very empathetic game about the power of community and being careful with each other. More than once the game is laugh-out-loud funny too, as poor Harold is often destined not to be listened to.

SLOW-PLAICED

The only problem with it all is its slow pacing and mildly repetitive nature. Events unfold very slowly, and even Harold himself moves around at a (sea) snail's pace. This gives every plot point time to breathe, but it's possibly too much time. It's no surprise that as he's a janitor, a lot of Harold's mundane tasks are repetitive, but once it gets to the point where you know every announcement on the ship's tube system (actual tubes!) by heart and have travelled the same corridors dozens of times, it's hard not to sigh as much as he does. Developer Slow Bros does offer some variety, however – you can play games at the arcade, help with experiments, or do light janitorial work.

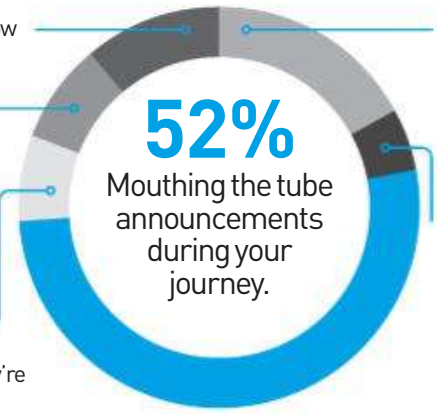
At the end of the day, this is a very story-focussed game, and the story it has to offer is absolutely beautiful and well-crafted, but you'll enjoy it despite its gameplay elements, not because of them.

Makes for a wonderful interactive movie. You may need some patience to see it through to the end, but it's a beautiful, rewarding adventure. **Malindy Hetfeld**

8
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: HAROLD HALIBUT



11% Helping a fellow Fedoran with their problems just by being there.

8% Taking a screenshot because the Fedora is just that beautiful.

7% Forgetting a character's name because they're all so complicated.

17% Running an unnecessary errand immediately and perfectly and still getting told off.

5% Ignoring the decontamination procedure in the energy district.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

MAJOR RALLY SANDSTROM
The only policeman on the Fedora takes his job very seriously.

BRENNA CASSELCHOP
The All Water CEO is mayor of the Fedora. Conflict of interests?

JEANNE MAREAUX
An elderly scientist, exasperated at Harold's clumsiness.

STATPACK

05
Developers make up the core development team. That's surprisingly few people for a game as gorgeously detailed as this one.

01
Game of Space Toast, available in your in-game PDA. Well, even a spaceship janitor has got to relax somehow when he's not cleaning filters.

12
Years was how long it took to develop Harold Halibut. The care's visible in every single hand-crafted scene. Just look at the characters' clothes!

SECOND OPINION SLOW STARTER

I'm from Bristol, so stop-motion is in my cheese-loving DNA. Harold Halibut is a gorgeous interactive execution of the form that's lovely to let wash over you – as slow as that wave is. At times that lackadaisical pace works well, giving an almost Shenmue-like vibe to plodding around and talking to characters. But less so as it progresses, especially as there's so little to interact with. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Show your support for shipmate Onat by showing up to his stage show.

SILVER
Help Harold keep the Fedora sparkling by cleaning up all the graffiti on the ship.

GOLD
Talk to All Water's sibling workers to learn the truth about the fourth brother.

Planet Zoo: Console Edition

Radio the keepers, it's about to get wild

When business simulators arrive on console, fans of the genre take a collective deep breath as the control schemes can be trickier than most to master. And when you begin playing Planet Zoo you might have to take just one more meditative moment, because diving head-first into sandbox mode to create your zoo of dreams is intimidating, to say the least.

Instead of being quickly humbled by the sight of how much space you've got to play with in the vast plains of Africa, career mode is your best place to start. Here, after choosing your desired difficulty level you're introduced to zoo owner extraordinaire Bernie Goodwin. Panning over his twinned zoo and home proves impressive, but you aren't being hired to poke about the peafowl enclosure, you're being employed to finish off the build.

KEEP UP, KEEPER

Within the genre in general, tutorials can feel like a slog, but we'd advise you not to skip them here – wholesome Welsh gal Nancy Jones serves as our guiding light. Building, placing items, and running successful shifts is overwhelming at first, but with Nancy teaching you the ropes you'll do right by your many four-legged friends.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £39.99 (base game), £49.99 (Deluxe Edition), £99.99 (Ultimate Edition)
ETA Out now
PUB Frontier Developments
DEV Frontier Developments
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH N/A
ACCESSIBILITY Mute non-voice audio during conversation; colour vision deficiency toggles; subtitles

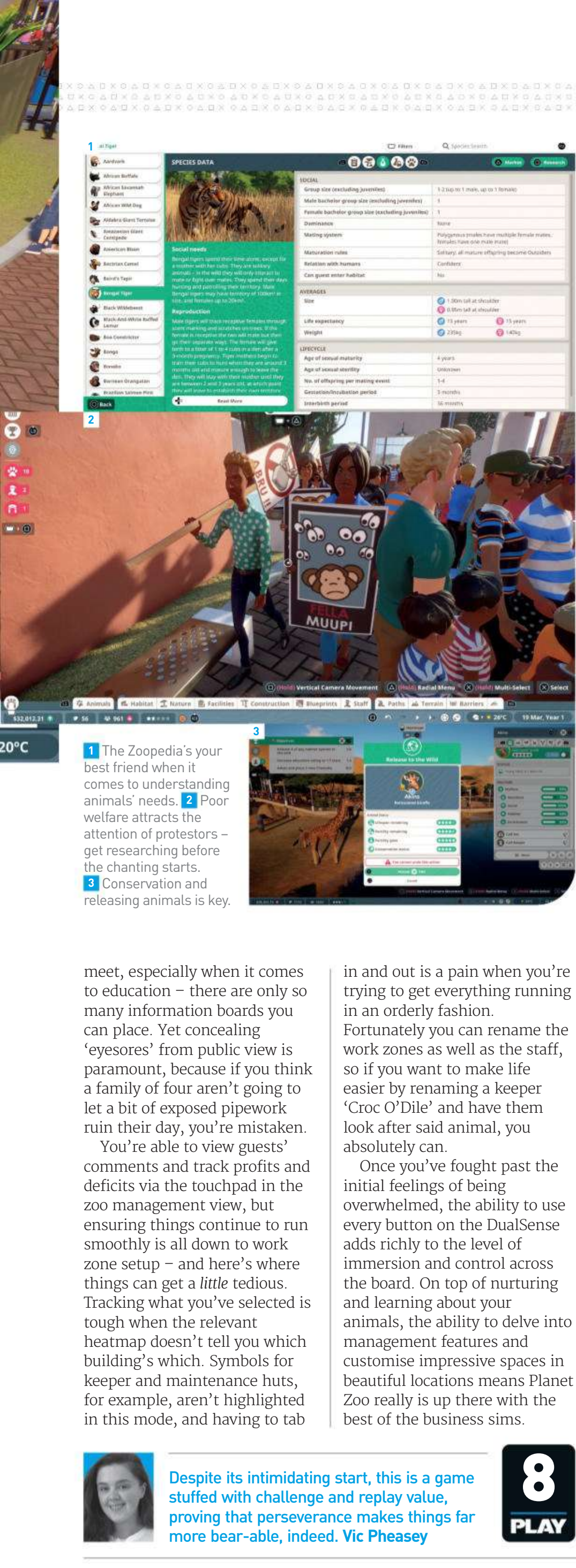
This is a game that requires patience, and taking your time to work on those first parks really does set you up for success later on. Being alone with 40k and a chew toy in your back pocket, getting started is still daunting. But after honing your skills, heading into tasks against the clock in Timed mode or wheeling and dealing between your zoo and other players' ones worldwide in Franchise mode is much less intimidating.

Planet Zoo has massive visual appeal and, if building's your passion, you're really able to let your creativity shine in every game mode. Creating three habitats *sounds* easy, but factor in how much space each species needs per animal, their preferred biome items, and if they need coverage, and you can see you need to put plenty of thought into your park.

LOTS TO LEARN

Maintaining animal welfare is a must and it's essential to have keepers and vets close by to tend to any needs. While it's costly in time at first, creating your own blueprints makes life easier when it comes to zoo expansion. When one of the slippery blighters escapes, having staff facility huts nearby reduces the time it takes to recapture the beastie, and also your panic levels. Well, sort of; you can only be *so* chill when there's a lion on the loose.

Obvious dangers aside, guests' needs are almost tougher to



1 The Zoopedia's your best friend when it comes to understanding animals' needs. 2 Poor welfare attracts the attention of protestors – get researching before the chanting starts. 3 Conservation and releasing animals is key.

meet, especially when it comes to education – there are only so many information boards you can place. Yet concealing 'eyesores' from public view is paramount, because if you think a family of four aren't going to let a bit of exposed pipework ruin their day, you're mistaken.

You're able to view guests' comments and track profits and deficits via the touchpad in the zoo management view, but ensuring things continue to run smoothly is all down to work zone setup – and here's where things can get a *little* tedious. Tracking what you've selected is tough when the relevant heatmap doesn't tell you which building's which. Symbols for keeper and maintenance huts, for example, aren't highlighted in this mode, and having to tab in and out is a pain when you're trying to get everything running in an orderly fashion. Fortunately you can rename the work zones as well as the staff, so if you want to make life easier by renaming a keeper 'Croc O'Dile' and have them look after said animal, you absolutely can.

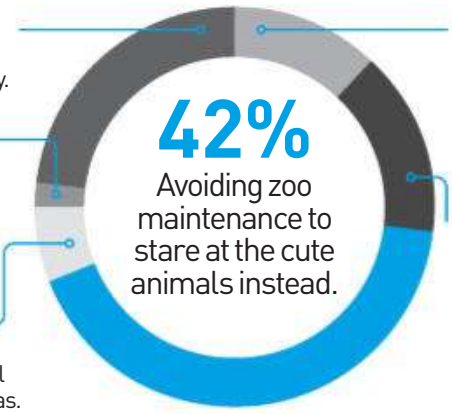
Once you've fought past the initial feelings of being overwhelmed, the ability to use every button on the DualSense adds richly to the level of immersion and control across the board. On top of nurturing and learning about your animals, the ability to delve into management features and customise impressive spaces in beautiful locations means Planet Zoo really is up there with the best of the business sims.

Despite its intimidating start, this is a game stuffed with challenge and replay value, proving that perseverance makes things far more bear-able, indeed. Vic Pheasey

8
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: PLANET ZOO: CE



23% Wishing you could tour your own park in reality.

2% Taking the time to try to place perfect paths and ultimately rage quitting.

6% Trying to get the perfect long-grass-to-soil ratio for the pandas.

12% Checking the guest comments and thinking that the customer *isn't* always right.

15% Trying to locate and chase down escaped animals while chaos ensues.

HOW TO... ENRICH ANIMAL LIVES

Hire a spare vet or two and head into the research tab, then click on the species you want them to research. Doing this will allow you to purchase food and toy enrichment items for your animals, resulting in many happy campers, better inspection reports, and more cashflow.

STATPACK

12
Parks await you in career mode, where completing the three main challenges will earn each zoo a bronze, silver, and gold star.

55
Minutes are on the clock in Hope Sanctuary's timed challenge for you to set up the rescue centre – try not to panic now!

39
Trophies are available across all the different modes, but channel your inner tortoise in obtaining them. Slow and steady wins that platinum.

LOVING/HATING

TIME IS MONEY
Creating your own blueprints for constructions make life so much easier – who doesn't love a bit of copying and pasting?

HAVEN'T GOT A ZOO...
Work zone setup's a slog, as buildings are undeterminable during editing. Unlike elephants, you see, we *do* forget.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Dr Ian Malcolm would be proud once that first baby animal is born in your zoo.

SILVER
Releasing 20 critically endangered animals earns you a silver and a pat on the back.

GOLD
Opening a zoo on every continent brings a whole new meaning to going global.

Nothing strikes fear into the enemy like a full line of cavalry!

Unicorn Overlord

Friendship is strategic magic

At first glance, you would be forgiven for thinking that Unicorn Overlord is just another JRPG, most likely very middle-of-the-road, with attractive art but shallow characters and a very basic story. As soon as you start to play it, however, it becomes apparent how much of a misapprehension that is. For one thing, it's actually a strategy RPG, and a unique one at that.

Many SRPGs follow the lead of Fire Emblem, but with Unicorn Overlord Vanillaware and Atlus decided they wanted to do more, and more again. What results is a beautiful hybrid of SRPG and RTS that marries auto-battling with the code-your-own-combat of Final Fantasy XII's Gambit system (which it's really about time someone did something with again).

While the game is kind enough to pause while you're selecting your units' movements, as soon as you unpause to carry them out the enemy will be on you just as quickly. You really need to keep an eye on everything on the map because you never know when Gryphon Riders are going to come over the mountains behind you.

THY WILL BE DONE

You cannot directly command your units while they're in combat, so preparation is key. You can use the Tactics system to tell them what skills you would like them to prioritise, and what type of units you'd like them to use them on, but the moment they get into battle it's hands-off. This gives the whole experience the feeling of 'directing' your units rather than controlling them, which is generally only found in much larger-scale wargames.

This ties in nicely to another of the game's strengths, as Unicorn Overlord does a fantastic job of making the cast feel like an army of regular people trying to save their home rather than a collection of Very Special People chosen by fate or the gods or something similarly grandiose. The vast majority of enemy commanders you meet will have names and faces, even if they're not relevant to the story, and a lot of them will have their own coats of arms too. Even the units on your side will have their own crests, showing who their exact loyalty is to; they might be fighting alongside you in the field but you are not the be-all and end-all of their world.

UNITE AND CONQUER

Of course, the developers didn't decide to shake everything up just for the sake of it, and some of the staples of the genre are still very comfortably included. Units who fight together will form a bond which results in stat boosts and sometimes special conversations, and a lot of the characters' class types will be familiar, though even these things have been given a

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £54.99
ETA Out now
PUB Sega
DEV Vanillaware, Atlus
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 50+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable auto-advance wait time for dialogue; individual music/sound effects/voice volume controls; overworld auto-run option

Marries auto-battling with the code-your-own-combat of Final Fantasy XII's Gambit system.

1

2

3

1 Smiting your enemies with divine lightning is always fun. **2** There are lots of characters you can recruit along the way – or execute! **3** Want your shield emblazoned with a mermaid and a boar either side of a hot pink diamond? By all means.

couple of little twists to bring them more in line with the spirit of the game. For example, those Rapport conversations can only be accessed at certain points on the map, and you can't stop for a chat if you haven't liberated the area. And those familiar class types now move in groups of up to six units at once, so how they interact with one another is much more complicated than just relying on your over-levelled paladin.

Compelling battle mechanics aside, Unicorn Overlord has plenty of extra flair to top things off. Gathering materials for restoring towns enables you to further strengthen bonds between your units at the tavern; you can design custom heraldry for almost every character; and there are side-quests aplenty in the form of extra battles, charting the entire map, and a useful mining minigame. It is polished and thought through in every detail.

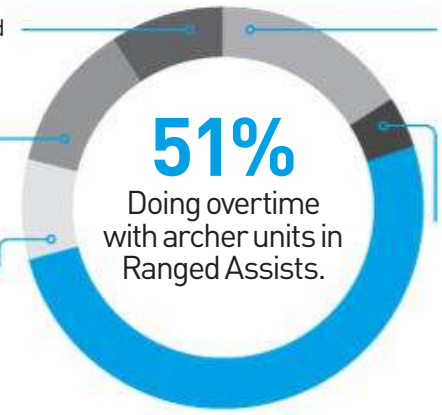
The use of Live-2D-style animations on the characters' sprites, both in and out of battle, is an excellent touch, avoiding the often-awkward 'portrait and 3D model' combo of other games, allowing battles and cutscenes to flow seamlessly using the same art. The sprites are detailed enough to convey the lovely character designs yet move with enough nuance that it doesn't feel like you're trapped watching the battle models sadly stumble through dramatic story moments. It all comes together to make a very pretty package.

Has all the magic and grandiosity of the best RPGs in a gorgeous, slick, yet pleasingly deep package that's nonetheless easy to approach. Max Williams

8
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: UNICORN OVERLORD



9% Digging around in the dirt, status be damned.

12% Swatting enemy gryphons away from your command post.

8% Making honeyapple deliveries across the kingdom.

16% Feeding the army a wild amount of smoked nuts for the stamina recovery.

4% Hunting across the map to find where the Rapports have popped up.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

SCARLETT
Priestess of the Palevian Orthodoxy and a powerful magick wielder.

OCHLYS
An angelic warrior who will trade items for any Divine Shards you can find.

EMPEROR GALERIUS
Conquered the entire continent; wants to be ruler of all creation.

HOW TO... RECRUIT RENAULT

Events
Nations & Organizations
Cornia (Duke's seat)
Drakenhold (Characters)
Renault
He then hid his face from the world and took a new name—Laurent—offering his aid to the Liberation in their assault on Zenoiran bases. In the end, he realized he was powerless alone and offered to join the Liberation's ranks.
Select Link
Return

Helpful to know, given he leaves after regaining consciousness. Complete story quest The Priestess, Abducted, then do four Liberation Quests in Cornia or Drakenhold. These are ones where you free a Fort or Town, but some similar ones are side-quests, so watch which type you're doing.

THE FIRST 12 HOURS

1 Liberating towns, delivering supplies, and hoping your kidnapped friend is not in a hurry to be rescued. **2** Cornia is sprawling, but passing into Drakenhold puts into perspective just how much more of Fevrith there is to see. **3** Chasing Zenoira out of Drakenhold is a slow process, and includes a brilliant castle siege.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Defeating a five-member unit in one battle. Very satisfying indeed.

SILVER
It's easy to get lost in Cornia, but there are four more kingdoms to see. It's a big world.

GOLD
Coliseum champion Amalia is an absolute beast in combat. Take her down for this.

This level looks and feels like Studiopolis zone from Sonic Mania, with bucketloads of imagination.

Freedom Planet 2

Not so much 'beating Sonic at his own game' as evolving it

This anthropomorphic sequel makes the leap to console after its stint on PC, and it fits PlayStation beautifully. The original Freedom Planet started life as a fan-made Sonic game, but the aim for this followup was to "leave nostalgia behind" and cement the series' identity as a great action platformer in its own right. It's certainly an ambitious offering, but is it actually good?

The answer is yes. The four playable characters have enough personality to make their stories worth playing, especially as their moves and abilities change the experience even though the levels themselves are the same. Whether it's Carol the wildcat collecting an item mid-stage that enables her to ride a motorbike (which is just so cool) or Milla the hound using her powers to throw short projectiles, you'll have to approach stages and boss battles in different and engaging ways. Combat is way more involved than merely jumping on enemies' heads, and it soon becomes clear that well-timed use of the invincibility blink is integral to your success. The game does need such elements of precision as it can feel a little breathless and scrappy at times, thanks in part to the supercharged character movement.

Ironically, it would probably be better if the faster-than-Sonic speed weren't there as the levels are very large and, as with Sonic, it's often hard to see what's in front of you when the 2D scenery and enemies are flashing into view. While some levels rival Sonic Mania for ingenious, charming, and endorphin-triggering level design, other sections merely feel 'good enough' rather than outright 'superb'.

INFO

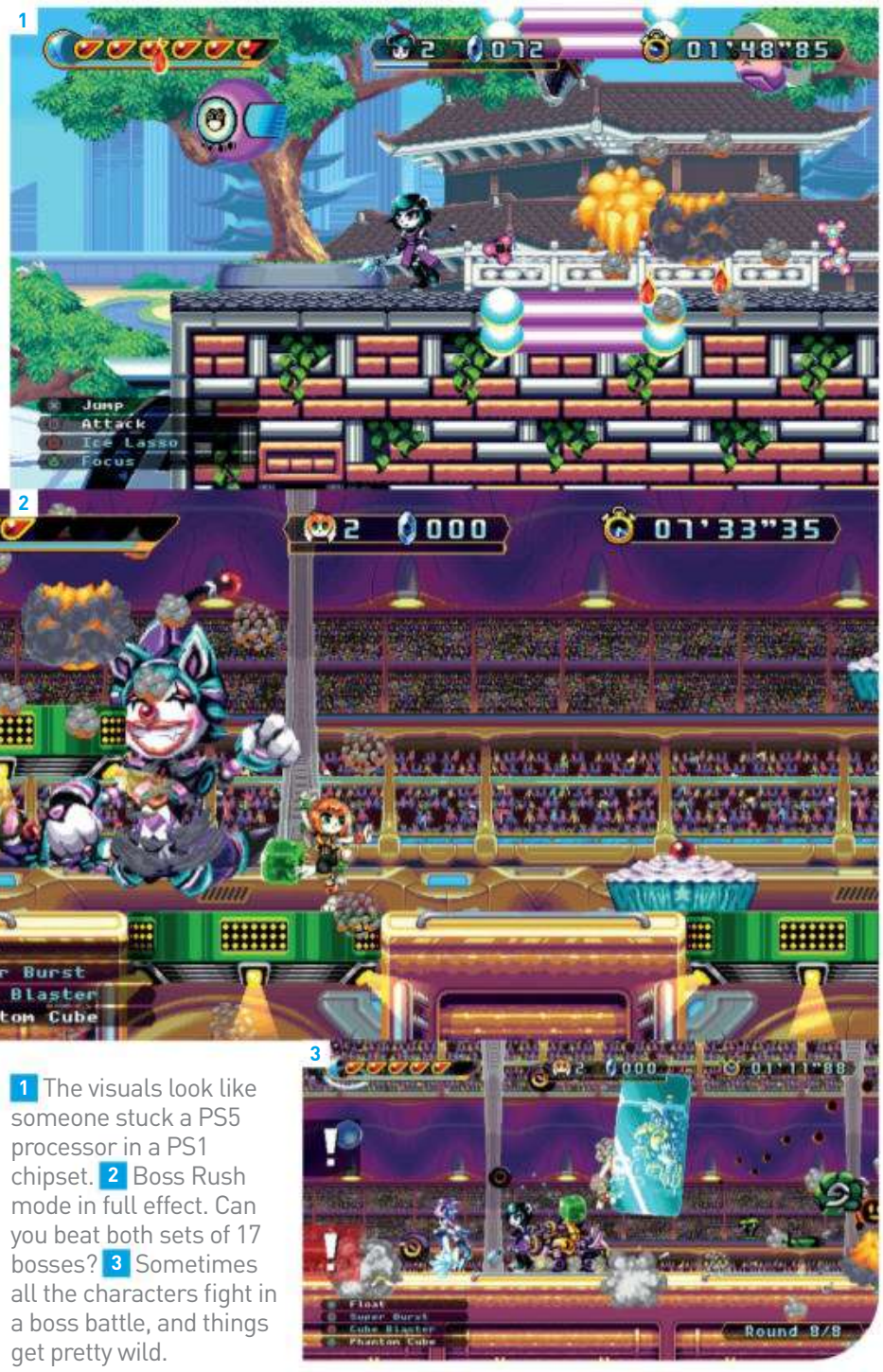
FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Marvelous Europe
DEV GalaxyTrail
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10 hrs to credits; easily 50 hrs in total
ACCESSIBILITY Remappable controls

GIRL POWER

Story scenes are brief and well-acted, and the way they play out for each of the four female leads works well, allowing you to experience key moments from a different perspective on subsequent playthroughs. Characters are influenced by the impressive supporting cast in believable side-stories and always seem conscious of their motivations, making for a commendably interwoven story.

In terms of movement, even though the game appears to move like Sonic at first glance inertia is way less important here as series heroine Lilac and co can run up vertical walls from a standing start as long as there's a quarter-pipe slope to begin. That means very little frustration, and while you'll still probably fall off ceilings because you're pushing left when actually it should be an upside-down right, gameplay is usually flowing and accessible. Many enemies drop items that can be used in shops, but there's little other reason to risk losing health in a fight, meaning you can often just jump (or dash or fly) up and over them to safety.

Beautiful visuals, great enemy designs, and funny jokes put it in platforming's higher echelons.



1 The visuals look like someone stuck a PS5 processor in a PS1 chipset. 2 Boss Rush mode in full effect. Can you beat both sets of 17 bosses? 3 Sometimes all the characters fight in a boss battle, and things get pretty wild.

Of course, bosses can't be avoided, and you won't want to skip them anyhow as they're more fun than the main levels thanks to their excellent designs.

LIKE A BOSS

This new console port comes with Boss Rush mode, though it's not a main menu option, instead being tucked away in the Battlesphere hub, letting you fight previously-faced bosses to go for new high scores and faster completion times. It's *really* difficult as you're only given a finite number of health pickups to use as you go, with no auto-healing between fights. As a result, the Battlesphere adds several extra hours to the run time with these new challenges complementing the existing trials, and gives you somewhere fun and focussed to go when the game itself is finished.

Another endgame element comes with the neat addition of potions and badges that you can buy and equip. While these make life easier on first play, they can also make the game harder in order to achieve higher level grades, again boosting replay value.

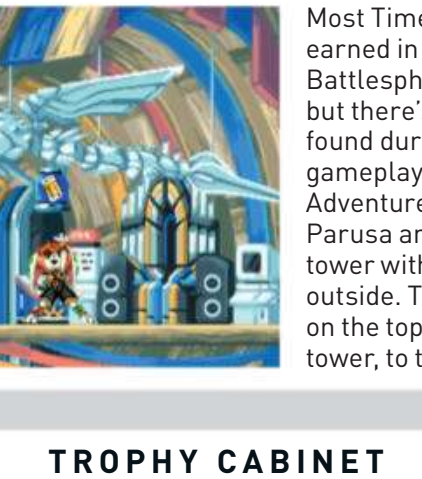
Developer GalaxyTrail is very clear about what it's trying to deliver; Freedom Planet 2 is ambitious in its scale, and a success in most areas. Beautiful visuals, great enemy designs, and genuinely funny jokes put the game in platforming's higher echelons, and it can certainly be discussed in the same sentences as the genre's best ones, even if it doesn't quite surpass them.

A large, beautifully-designed platformer that moves past its 16-bit inspiration in many ways, though the levels feel just a little stretched. Still a huge success. Justin Towell

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: FREEDOM PLANET 2



30% Using your characters' abilities to navigate the sprawling 2D levels.

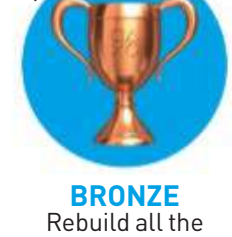
3% Holding right and taking in the speed as you loop like Sonic.

15% Piecing together the statues in the damaged museum as bonus busywork.

10% Restarting another boss. This time is the one. Er, sorry, THIS time.

2% Beating the secret level to unlock the oddly tucked-away Boss Rush mode.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES



CHLOE
A weasel who sells items to you while talking about herself in the third person.

CAPTAIN KALAW
Hosts the Battlesphere events and appears friendly. BUT IS HE?

MERGA
This Water Dragon is the main antagonist, with a good line in maniacal laughter

STATPACK

32
Action levels to complete, including the secret one. You can unlock that by acquiring all the Time Capsules across the rest of the game.

60
Number of in-game photos you can save from Photo mode. You can even select your character's pose in pictures, which is rather cute.

38
Bosses, although the final boss has several forms that count as a boss each. Each boss has a time attack stage in the Battlesphere.

HOW TO... GET THE LAST TIME CAPSULE

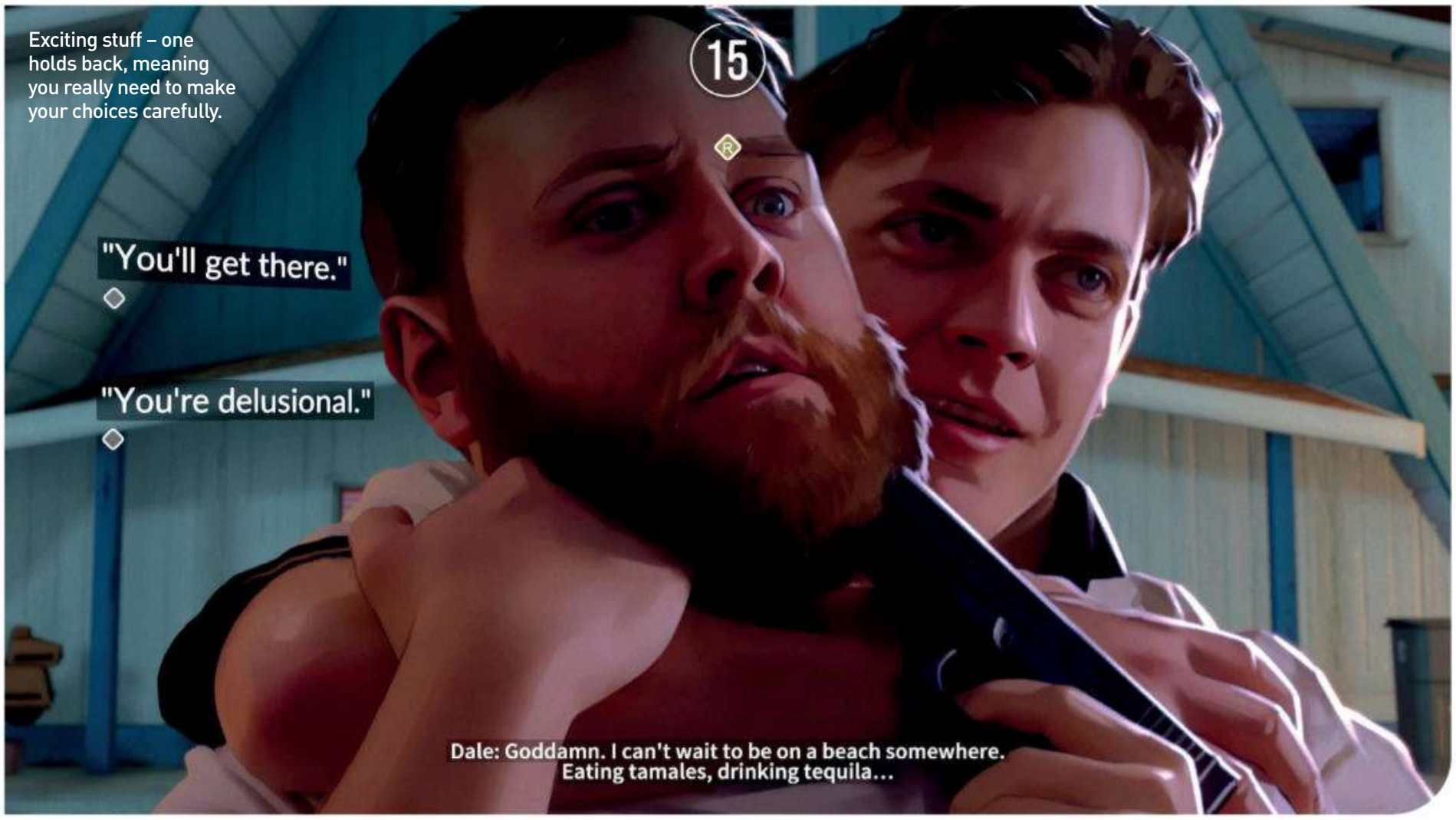
Most Time Capsules are earned in the Battlesphere challenges, but there's one to be found during open gameplay. Head to Adventure Square in Parusa and go in the tower with the statue outside. The capsule is on the top level of the tower, to the right.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Rebuild all the museum's broken exhibits. Now they're worth looking at.

SILVER
Complete all the game's stages in under four hours combined time.

GOLD
Complete all the Battlesphere challenges, achieving an S Rank.



Exciting stuff – one holds back, meaning you really need to make your choices carefully.

As Dusk Falls

In this robbery, no-one gets away clean

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Interior Night
DEV Interior Night
PLAYERS 1-8
LENGTH 7 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Menu and gameplay narration; text-to-speech; UI colour and font options; QTE difficulty/timing options; subtitle size and colour options; closed captions

Great stories often centre on normal people given no choice but to step up and become heroes. They're a frequent choice for narrative games like (just think of Telltale's The Walking Dead or Life Is Strange) as we all think we know how we would react as ordinary people in extraordinary situations, and interactive dramas such as these can let us live out some of these common fantasies.

In As Dusk Falls, you primarily need to make decisions during a hostage situation. Vince, his wife Michelle, father Jim, and daughter Zoe make an unplanned stay at a motel and are attacked by three brothers, Tyler, Dale, and Jay Holt, who are fleeing the police after a robbery. The story is split in two – during the hostage situation, you mostly play as Vince, but you also learn more about the brothers and the tragic circumstances that set them on their criminal path. The second part is an epilogue that shows the Holts on the run while also trying to tie up some loose ends based on your previous choices, but that chapter feels slightly unnecessary, because for all that it attempts to show the mental toll the events take on all parties, it only manages to scratch the surface and even leaves one character's story completely open.

You make plenty of decisions, most of which have immediate outcomes, making them feel weighty and easily traceable. The circumstances allow for all of the decisions you'd expect to make – do you listen to your kidnappers or do you antagonise them? Do you choose violence? It's solid stuff, brilliantly acted, but in an attempt to create more excitement, As Dusk Falls tends to cross the line to the ridiculous, becoming unintentionally funny or clichéd.

SAY THE LINE

Characters like the crook who says things like "My employers aren't very patient people" or the kidnapper going "One more step and the girl gets it" are stale as bread. However, As Dusk Falls offers something unique in its multiplayer mode. Using a mobile companion app, additional players can vote on choices or veto them, which adds a fun extra layer to the experience. The visual style is also remarkable, using highly expressive graphic novel artwork that brings out the emotion of a scene, even though the relative lack of animation takes some getting used to. As Dusk Falls is also geared towards first-time players – while it offers some fantastic accessibility options, more seasoned players are unlikely to miss a quicktime event unless they choose to.

> You make plenty of decisions, most of which have weighty, immediate outcomes.

This game shows you don't need zombies to test a character's limits, and it manages to portray difficult themes with empathy, but for a heist storyline, the possible outcomes feel oddly uninspired.

The building blocks are all there, but As Dusk Falls veers between going overboard and playing it safe so frequently that the end result is just okay. **Malindy Hetfeld**

7 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (reviewed), PS4 **PRICE** £15.99 **ETA** Out now
PUB Annapurna Interactive **DEV** Open Roads Team **LENGTH** 2+ hrs **PLAYERS** 1

OPAL You know, I... I'm not sure.
Seems like there must be a story here.
TESS Isn't this Grandma and Grandpa's wedding china?
(Just let it go.)

Open Roads

Heading home down the beaten path

The boundary between innocence and maturity is often marked by the realisation that your parents are fallible human beings – just like you. Here, you play as 16-year-old Tess as the dust settles in the wake of her grandma's passing and subsequent estate sale. Tess is losing her childhood home, and embarking on an uncertain future with her divorced mum Opal… until the pair find a trunk full of evidence that Tess' grandmother had a secret life.

From many of the same devs who made 2016's Gone Home and 2018's Tacoma, this project sees a freshly formed team finding their own way after an extremely tumultuous span of development. The compromises that clearly had to be made as a result never fully disappear from the rearview mirror.

In a similar vein to those earlier titles, you're presented with a snooper's paradise of trinkets, letters, and photos to sift through. But rather than AR or audio recordings elucidating the story's finer details, here Tess bounces thoughts off of her mum. This mother-daughter dynamic offers a refreshing change of focus, and the game is at its best as Tess picks apart the more poisonous stories Opal has been telling herself.

Some light puzzling is required to get in and around the more dilapidated pitstops on this road trip, but Open Roads isn't breaking the mould. From packing up a house full of memories to picking through a summer home, environments are smaller in scale than all that's come before, though still impactful. For instance, William Morris' Strawberry Thief is expertly deployed on the walls of a room where the truth finally comes into view.

The major wrong turn here is the fact Tess and Opal are decades late to the family-secret party; the most interesting narrative action happened and was resolved years before, without either protagonist's involvement. The final beat is hopeful, but overly neat as a result. Though we look forward to wherever the Open Roads Team journeys next, we can't help but feel this family drama could do with being messier.

> **You're given a snooper's paradise of trinkets, letters and photos to sift through.**

A return to form, for better and worse. Though we enjoy our time with this sleuthing pair, the mystery they're chasing runs out of road all too quickly. **Jess Kinghorn**

6 PLAY

THREE TO PLAY

PSN games you might have missed

Every month loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're taking a quick look at some that didn't quite make the cut. This month we're flinging snow, serving up some tasty 'za, and plating up our equally delicious catch of the day.

While we wonder when exactly Britain's never-ending chill will end, 'tis definitely not the season for **SOUTH PARK: SNOW DAY!** An apocalyptic polar vortex blows through Cartman, Stan, Kyle, and Kenny's home, cancelling school but ushering in tension among the already-fractious foul-mouthed children. As regular South Park game protagonist the New Kid (who never features in the actual cartoons), you're recruited to their ranks to save the town from an endless, freezing winter. Well, that's a situation that feels all too real as we write this.

As someone who's never really got on with the animated sitcom, this co-op actioner for up to four players was always going to be a hard sell for me. That said, if you do still love the show, you'll probably feel this game pulls its pottymouthed punches – not least of all because it offers only a scant few hours of activity.

Speaking of smackdowns, those gnarly heroes in a half-shell return for **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Arcade: Wrath Of The Mutants**. This beat-'em-up centres four-player local co-op, and is in fact an expanded rerelease of an arcade game from 2017, which itself nodded back to classic Turtles arcade games from the 1990s (yes, really). For console, it's been given new stages and fresh bosses to liven it up even more. Alas, the action is so straightforward that the most exciting battle may in fact be arguing over who gets to play as Raphael.

From losing all your 50ps at the arcade to losing yourself in the cosiest of vibes at home, let's take a look at **Moonglow Bay**. Imagine Stardew Valley if it was actually all about the fishing minigame (and not just because we *made* it all about the fishing minigame for the last ten hours – gotta catch 'em all, as no-one on PlayStation ever said). Trundling out to sea on your own wee boat, reeling in a whopper, and cooking, then serving it up for your local community is what it's all about in this sweet little voxel-based title. Yeah, there are plenty of bones in this trout, but we are so endeared that we *almost* don't mind picking those out.

ExtendedPLAY

From updates to favourites – the games we just can't quit

Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League – Season One

Set the whole world laughing

The rocky launch period for this live service shooter is over, and season one begins. The Joker has been added as a free character, and he's well-designed and fun to play in combat. The problem? Everything else, from a head-scratching meta to even more rehashed missions and baffling progression.

The clown prince of crime from an alternate dimension (though largely the Joker you know, it's mostly for plot reasons) *is* free. Sort of. You can pay to skip unlocking him and get him right away. Want to do it normally? Okay, grind through 35 levels of asinine, tired content. In fact, even if you do pay to unlock him, you will still have to grind until the moment the Squad frees the Joker from Brainiac's clutches narratively to begin to get to the meat of the season, as Mastery levels remain locked until Level 35 anyway.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PUB Warner Bros Games
DEV Rocksteady Studios
YEAR 2024

GASSED UP

To cut through the noise, this is FEAR Level 35, essentially a discrete rank for this season only. But until you get to that point, you've only three difficulties to play through in the 'new' incursion missions (which, in reality, are retooled version of missions you've done before), meaning the grind is slow going and you'll only be able to earn the lowest tier of new Scarecrow weaponry for hours. That's especially galling if you have a high-level team, as these low difficulties can be yawn-worthy to constantly replay against easy foes.

Even worse, hours in, when you do get to explore more of

> Not only is the new batch of missions uncreative, the way they want you to play is too.

this season's first episode (a final half is due), you realise the new meta is just plain bad. Early mutators nerf the builds from Season Zero, meaning burn builds are less effective (annoyingly one of three the Joker can spec toward), and Venom ones moreso. Basically, the Bane weapons you spent ages grinding for last season are now useless.

Instead, Scarecrow's weapons are all about inflicting Poison. It's not an especially fun combat option, but, frustratingly, it's less of an option in this season. Later mutators mean enemies not killed by poison get a free revive, and another nerfs all non-poison damage by 95%. Not only is the new batch of missions uncreative (two of the six are cannon minibosses), the way they want you to play is too. And don't get me started on the Brainiac fight being a Green Lantern rematch.

The joke of it all is that the Joker is a fun character to play. Even with the same ol' guns he feels genuinely different. But those who bounced off once will again when faced with a multi-hour grind to get to the fun. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

STALKER: Shadow Of Chornobyl

Rad FPS or radioactive waste?

INFO **FORMAT** PS4 **PUB** GSC Game World Global Ltd
DEV GSC Game World **YEAR** 2024

This not-quite-open world FPS, a slightly more grounded Fallout, has you running around fields thinking that maybe living in the aftermath of a nuclear disaster won't be so bad. Then you inevitably stroll into an irradiated area that causes your health bar to plummet because you didn't drink enough vodka. (Interesting moral?) Or a pack of wild dogs eat you. Or something even nastier teaches you the importance of quicksaving after every single step.

This is a tough, old game, and it looks it. NPCs' mouths move like those of ventriloquists' dummies, and the environments are tiny by modern standards. Yet it's compelling. Some of that is down to its unrelenting difficulty instilling a Soulslike sense of stubbornness in you, but it's also delightfully weird. Its world looks fairly dull but has many deadly secrets just below the surface. Great sound design (just how close *is* that pack of irradiated death hounds?) keeps you on your toes as you explore. The bestiary starts out bland (we hope you like shooting angry men with bad dress sense) but gets better. We especially like the creature with telepathic powers and vanity issues who snatches the camera away for close ups of itself screaming. You'll keep playing just to see what nightmare STALKER throws at you next.

> Being glossed up for porting to PlayStation hasn't hurt the game's atmosphere.

Being glossed up for porting to PlayStation (and given Ukrainian spelling) hasn't hurt the game's atmosphere. Its creepiest enemies look more horrifying than ever, and any shooter where you have to press 'save' almost as often as the trigger can only be improved on a console with such speedy load times. An outstanding horror FPS that's well worth a look. **Abbie Stone**

Would we go as far as to say this is still more fun than Suicide Squad: Kill The Justice League? Definitely.

Lego DC Super-Villains

Looking for caps in all the wrong places

Having graciously taken on the mantle of Player Two as my partner in crime makes their own malcontent, busts out of the prison for super-villains on Stryker's Island, and gets acquainted with an extended DC Comics' rogue's gallery, I ask one question and one question only: "When can I play as Harley Quinn?"

Our team needing work aside, this is another certified Traveller's Tales banger. The player-created villain is a wonderful, playful addition to an already massive roster of playable baddies, and can be made to look pretty much how you please. Referred to by other inmates of Stryker's simply as 'The Rookie,' our player creation possesses long flowing locks of pink hair and electricity powers – so naturally we named him 'Thorville' (as in, 'evil Thor'. Yes, I know he's not a DC character but sometimes your first idea *is* your best). However, it takes a cell block to bust out of a maximum security prison.

DC'S THE MOMENT

After all, what's the point of having all those toys if you don't play with them? As such, whether you're playing alone or in co-op, this introduction encourages you to body-hop from villain to villain with a press of △, and get better acquainted with each rogue's roulette wheel of abilities. You need to call on particular villains to solve specific puzzles throughout the game. Catwoman's abilities include athletic prowess and digging, for example, whereas the Penguin counts mind control among his skills.

Even though many levels are designed with a fixed, doll's-house-like view so you don't lose sight of the action, I still find myself getting lost in the brawling, body-hopping shuffle; when you see me punching the air, it's not so much in celebration as it is confusion. Still, between smashing up the blocky scenery for every little stud I can get my mitts on and chortling at the schoolyard insults flung between both heroes and villains, I'm having a good time.

INFO

FORMAT PS4
PUB Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
DEV Traveller's Tales
YEAR 2018

> **The player-created villain is a wonderful addition to a massive roster of playable baddies.**

And then Harley Quinn finally rollerblades onto the scene. She and the Joker are imagined here as a capering duo who livestream their crimes. Able to gather goons from around the level and command them into improbable squad formations such as, uh, a trampoline, Mistah J is the mechanical headline act of this terrible twosome… though Harley's hammer is good fun to swing.

What's less fun is being persistently haunted by a tooltip telling me to click L3 for a hint almost every time I dare to stop moving, cluttering what is already a busy-looking game. As levels frequently erupt into a flurry of caps and scraps, it's no wonder I keep getting lost in this rogue's gallery. **Jess Kinghorn**

Warframe – Dante Unbound

The new spellcaster offers magic moments

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (reviewed), PS4 **PUB** Digital Extremes
DEV Digital Extremes **YEAR** 2013

Although there's no accompanying story quest, the latest Warframe update feels like more of a leap forward than a step. While it primarily benefits those deep into the endgame, new and returning players have been shown some love too.

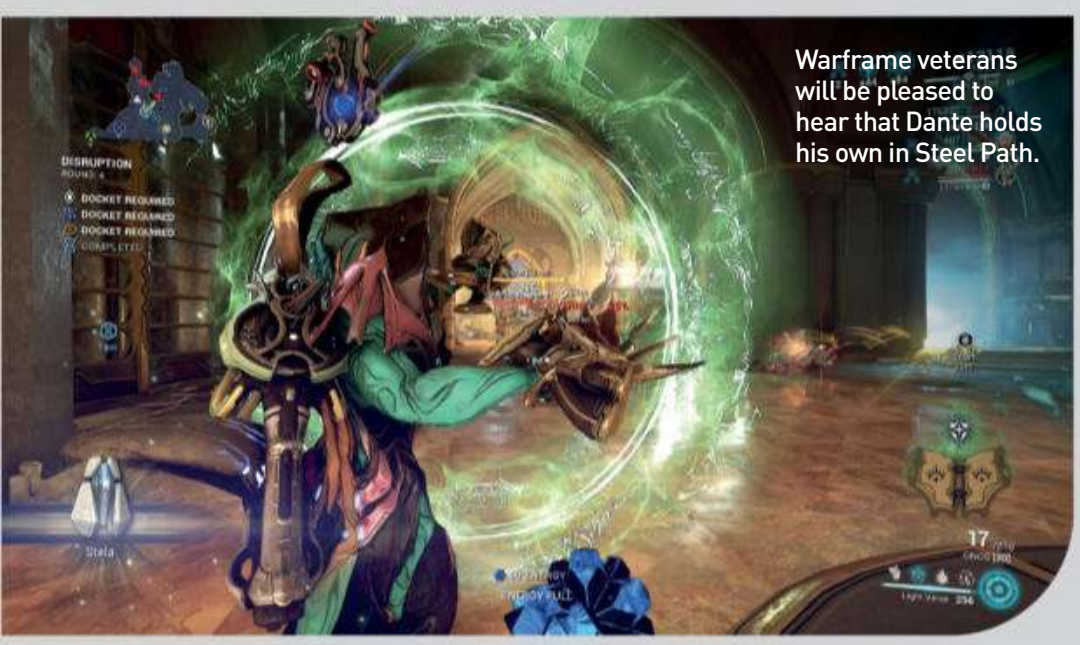
Inaros was already a high-survivability frame, but his rework in Dante Unbound makes him effectively immortal in the right hands. His abilities have been remixed to keep him mobile at all times (even when downed, via a spirit form for his resurrection mechanic), and it's now easier for him to heal and to spawn minions. He's not only tougher, he's also much more enjoyable to play as.

> Inaros was a high-survivability frame, but his rework makes him effectively immortal.

Dante – with his design, abilities, and even visual effects inspired by MMORPG spellcasters – is the star of the show, as you'd expect given his name's part of the title. His ability to grant a large amount of overguard alone makes him a valuable support frame, even before you factor in the abilities that render enemies vulnerable to status effects, and the ability to grant teammates temporary copies of his signature weapon for additional firepower. He has four versions of his Final Verse, dependent on the last two spells that he cast. One version recalls and multiplies any damage over time suffered by enemies in one devastating hit. The use of his abilities requires a little more thought than usual for maximum effectiveness.

The new Disruption node (requiring you to have completed the Whispers In The Walls quest, released late last year) where Dante's blueprints can be earned is fantastic, helped in no small part by the much-needed improvement to the Demolisher marker.

Though we haven't tried Deep Archimedea at time of writing due to a delay in its release, three missions in a row with no break, today, sounds like a gift rather than a chore to be shouldered. Warframe just keeps on giving. **Luke Kemp**



Warframe veterans will be pleased to hear that Dante holds his own in Steel Path.

2B is a blast to play.

Granblue Fantasy Versus: Rising – 2B

...or not 2B?

INFO **FORMAT** PS5, PS4 **PUB** Cygames
DEV Cygames, Arc System Works **YEAR** 2023

These days you'd almost be hard pushed to find a Japan-developed game that does crossovers that *hasn't* featured 2B, the android star of Nier: Automata. But while the mobile Granblue Fantasy includes heaps of brand collaborations, 2B's appearance in this fighter is notable as the first to happen in a Granblue game on console.

> While 2B fits right into the mix, she has quirks that make her feel quite different.

Arc System Works is used to adapting characters from other genres into fighting games – after all, that's what its work on Granblue Fantasy Versus is. While 2B fits right into the mix, she also has her own quirks that make her feel quite different, fitting for a fighter from a totally different world. That largely boils down to her skill system, which, while cooldown-based like the rest of the game, isn't broken down by individual abilities. Instead, her SKL Gauge is one pot that all of her skills draw from, all attacks courtesy of Pod 042. It's a very similar system to how skills work in Nier: Automata.

Similarly, 2B's combos are a bit more freeform than everyone else on the roster's, able to be continued without confirmed hits as well. To top it off, her unique action is an evade that, when successful, can be chained into a counter. It translates the way she feels to play in Nier: Automata wonderfully into a 2D fighter, diverging from the base game's mechanics just enough to feel true to 2B while also fitting within the mechanical framework the game already provides. While I wouldn't want every character added to be this different, for 2B it works. As she's the only current crossover character announced, I'm not sure I'll need to worry about others. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Baldur's Gate 3

Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and 'yes, and-ing' your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.

02

Resident Evil 4

Neither losing sight of its legacy or Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03

Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

06

Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

07

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

08

Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake's final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

10

NEW

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

PS1 overworld traipsing is reimagined here with ridiculous depth, making for one massive globetrotting RPG epic. Combat levels up from the first game, mixing together real-time hack-and-slash with slower commands for high-octane strategising.

11

Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking, new weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy's use of ray tracing is among the best we've seen. The sole problem is you're able to pick only one of two visual options.

12

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

13

Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

14

Tekken 8

Boasting a roster of returning favourites alongside new faces, and introducing mechanics that make every bout snappier, this fighter hits hard and fast. Looking better than ever only on current-gen hardware, busting out your Wind God Fist has never before felt so satisfying.

15

Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

16 NEW

Pentiment

Ever looked at a tapestry and thought: what if I could play that? And investigate a murder over the course of many years? Thankfully, there's no need to worry about being booted from the museum, as this excellent choice-driven narrative is playable at home.

17

Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

18 NEW

Helldivers 2

It's time to liberate the galaxy and spread democracy far and wide in the name of Super Earth. This tongue-in-cheek bug and 'bot shooter always brings you back for another round of co-op chaos. Just mind the friendly fire when you pepper the planet with orbital strikes.

19

Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

20

Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

21

Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

22

Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

23

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

In a hop, skip, and a time-warping jump, this once-beloved series has parkoured its way back into our hearts with a new protagonist, Sargon. Movement and combat both possess layers that are a joy to peel back throughout this metroidvania return-to-form.

24

EA Sports FC 24

FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

25

Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty

A soulslike without stamina? It's just one of the many clever twists in this Ancient Chinese epic where qi governs your actions instead. Go on a tear, and positive energy (for you, not your dead foes) helps you keep the momentum going. Just don't let negative energy build.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5

Helldivers 2 has you squashing bugs with over-the-top weaponry with friends, all in the name of Super Earth. Clever multiplayer antics and Starship-Troopers-like humour keep you sticking around, but if you want a palate cleanser, here are some others to try.

PICK #1

Exoprimal

Crisis via dino

Friendly fire might be turned on in Helldivers 2, but it's only a co-op game. So why not add a dash of competition with Exoprimal, where two teams battle it out against hordes of dinos (raptors literally tumble out of portals to overwhelm ruined cities) before facing off against each other? There's a lot of fun to be had here, especially if you stick with it – more modes and enemies are gradually unlocked as you play. Grab some friends, suit up in your mech, and get ready to make dinos extinct for a second time.

PICK #2

Deep Rock Galactic

Rock and stone

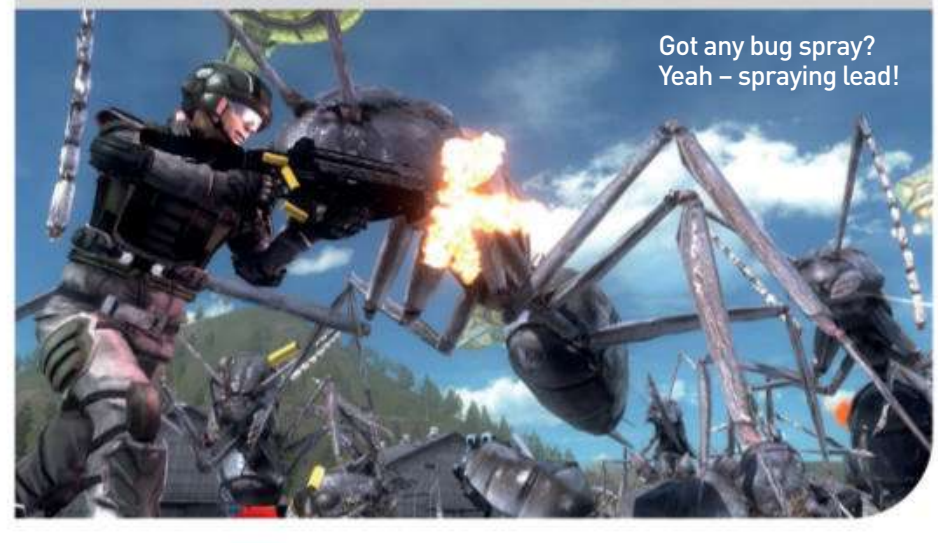
Instead of fending off enemies on a planet's surface, why not drill down into the depths with co-op partners instead? Procedurally generated caves mean no two missions are quite alike, and as your dwarves can mine their way through walls you can create your own path too. Many enemies lie in wait, including plenty of creepy-crawlies that you'll have to squash before you can make a desperate attempt to extract with your loot in tow – structure sound familiar? This has a similar vibe, but feels fresh to play.

PICK #3

Earth Defense Force 5

Getting antsy

Forget carrying the torch of democracy to other planets, and protect the one you're on. This game's got a distinct B-movie vibe; you defend your home from giant flying saucers and oversized insects – expect legions of massive ant corpses to be left in the wake of you and a buddy. Different classes make for many ways to play, be it beefing up with loads of weapons or taking to the skies with a jetpack to deliver justice from above. With loads of missions, it'll keep you busy for quite some time.



Got any bug spray?
Yeah – spraying lead!

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous, realistic western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. With train robberies, tootin' headshots, and racists to kill, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.

02

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upped to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04

The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05

Dreams

This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is a epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the table for all the delicious lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13

Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14

Resident Evil 2

Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 *and* PS4.

15

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

17

Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

18

Nier: Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demands* it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

19

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

20

Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

21

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

22

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

23

Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary... and then get killed by it.

24

Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

25 NEW

New Star GP

This lo-fi racer is the best of both worlds, finding pole position as it pursues a dedication to career mode with arcadey joy. Its lack of licensing just makes it more lightweight, able to have fun with evolving racing rivalries and destruction that'd make famous marques cringe.

TAYLOR MADE DEALS

Watching the pennies? We'll help you play more without breaking the bank

UNDER £20

EA Sports FC 24

£20 approx (PS5, game.co.uk)

Low-price trading season

Games like this prove we should be wary about an all-digital future. It's rare to see this latest FIFA reboot priced below £70 on digital storefronts, making the multi-store reduction to around £20 a mighty deal. Annual titles will always become less valuable as the year ticks on, meaning if you wait it out bricks-and-mortar stores are simply going to have to reduce the price to shift stock. Even so, this is a terrific game that's not showing its age at all, and should tide you over for some time to come if you're more interested in matches than the latest rosters.

UNDER £15

Tales Of Arise

£13.95 approx (PS5, thegamecollection.net)

Sales of a-low price

Like Final Fantasy, the long-running Tales RPGs are mostly disconnected adventures, so this latest one is a great place to start. This science-fantasy tale of interplanetary strife between the oppressed people of Dahna and their subjugators from Rena is one of the series' best, filled with gorgeous visuals and action-packed real-time combat. With dual protagonists – one from each planet – there's a whole party of compelling characters who each feel different to control in combat. Want more? There's a hefty DLC expansion as well, though not included here.

UNDER £10

Wild Hearts

£9.95 approx (PS5, amazon.co.uk)

A price that's been tamed

This Monster Hunter competitor didn't really take off. Published by EA Originals, it was developed by Omega Force, which also brought us the rather good Toukiden series last-gen. Support for updates has been dropped for months now, meaning the servers are only being maintained. And it's a real shame, as there's a lot to love here, in a game that feels like a genuinely different take on the giant beastie genre. Creatures inspired by Japanese mythology are gorgeous and fearsome in equal measure, and the woodwork gadgets are fun to use. Worth a look.

While Wild Hearts isn't getting any more updates, you can still have a wheely good time.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01 Synapse

Telekinesis and guns make a wonderful combo in VR. With one mapped to your left hand and the other to your right, you feel like a conductor of chaos as you blast your way through a rogue colonel's mind to uncover secrets. Eye-tracking is wonderfully used to target your telekinesis, meaning you can slam enemies all over the place as you reload your arsenal. It's got a roguelite structure, so you'll keep coming back.

02 Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

03 Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You*. Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

04 Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

05 Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

06 No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

07 Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

08 Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

09 Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

10 NEW Little Cities: Bigger!

Waving your hands like a conductor, you paint with land and accent with buildings. This is a town-builder toybox, with management mechanics sanded down to an accessible degree, and lots of delightful details like your city's denizens looking up to wave at you.

11 NEW Stilt

This one's at its best when you throw your arms wide and embrace the silliness. Straightforward platforming is reinvented in VR, and allows the simple joy of hurling yourself around to shine – to say nothing of the fact that upgrades enable you to strap cannons to your feet.

12 Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

13 The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

14 The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

15 Arizona Sunshine 2

The familiar survivalist beats of a 'one man against the apocalypse' setup are boosted by making that 'one man and his dog.' Zombie-offing action is already elevated in VR, but adding man's best friend to your arsenal makes this title one of the best in show.

PSVR Hall of fame

GREAT EXPERIENCES TO THIS DAY

01

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

02

The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

03

Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

04

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

05

Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

06

Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

07

Iron Man VR

With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

08

Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a *lot* of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

09

To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

10

I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

April's PS Plus lineup was all about revisiting forgotten fantasy realms – and recalling why they're fading into obscurity. While we *could* lay into FPS **Immortals Of Aveum** on PS5 again, after layoffs at Ascendant Studios last year we'd only be kicking someone when they're down.

Middling action strategy title **Minecraft Legends** on both PS5 and PS4 is another PS Plus offering we could focus on for this column – but instead we're going to angle the spotlight towards a bona fide banger that passed us by on its initial release.

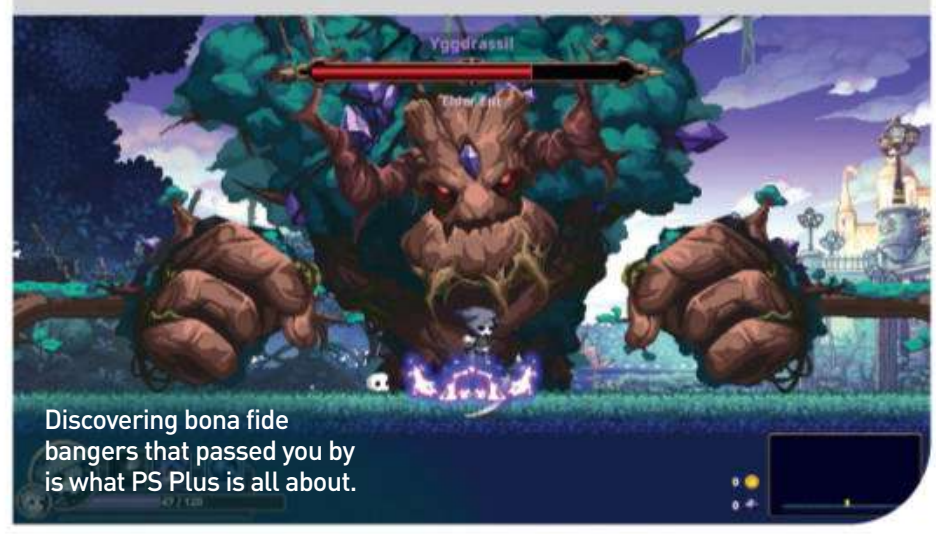
Stop us if you've heard this one before: only on PS4, **Skul: The Hero Slayer** is a platforming roguelite with gorgeous 2D pixel art. Wait, come back!

When a band of do-gooders rock up to the Demon King's castle, it's almost a clean sweep for the malevolent monarch... save for one skele-friend with a can-clobber attitude. Tasked with freeing countless castle-crashing chums from captivity, Skul sets out to rewrite the ending of this otherwise all-too-familiar fable.

We're immediately endeared to this little rattling roguelite protagonist, especially as you equip new skills by popping off your skull and replacing it with a noggin you like better. Skills, from waving a humble femur around to creating carnage with bigger, better swords, and even hurling lightning, introduce a decent amount of variety to every run.

As you might suspect, the action can quickly get chaotic, and though we love the art direction and slick animation, swish skills heaped upon flashy attacks do not make for the most readable scenes. All too often your run will be cut short because of one rogue heroic blow you had no hope of seeing coming amid such a busy-looking bust-up.

Still, rarely does it feel this good to be bad. Better yet, this roguelite gets straight to the point, and quits while it's a-head.



Discovering bona fide bangers that passed you by is what PS Plus is all about.

DIGITAL OFFER

FOR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION DEALS, TURN TO PAGE 50

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Deliciously essential open world action
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RISE OF THE RONIN
Ninja Gaiden's devs reinvent their style
→HANDS-ON
SYNDUALITY ECHO OF ADA
Dare you pilot your Cradle Coffin mech?
PLANET ZOO COMES TO PS5: THE EXPERT CONSOLE VERDICT
NUN COMPARE WITH THE SURREAL INDIKA
FROM SAN FRAN WITH GAMES – THE GDC EXPERIENCE
→BEAST MODE
MONSTER HUNTER'S BEHEMOTH FUTURE
Why the series is poised for to take over the world again!
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RetroStation

108 X-Men Origins: Wolverine Uncaged Edition

A beast of a game that improved on a mess of a movie

HIGHLIGHTS

DEFENDING: KEN AMADA 109 | CLASSIC GAME: MLB 11: THE SHOW 110
PLUS POINTS: JAK AND DAXTER: THE LOST FRONTIER 112 | A BRIEF HISTORY OF... REBOOTS 113
PARTING SHOT: STREETS OF RAGE 4 114

DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these May moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

5 YEARS

Excellent PSVR showcase Blood & Truth had us shooting cockney gangsters in a charmingly silly depiction of England's capital city. Tragically this was one of the final games from dearly departed London Studio to be released.

10 YEARS

Flawed but fun hack-'em-up Watch Dogs was a clever spin on the crime sandbox, though somewhat held back by starring Aiden Pearce, a lead with all the charisma and star power of a broken toaster. Try playing the superior sequels if you fancy a bit of hacking action.

20 YEARS

Rootin' tootin' shootin' in the Old West was the pitch for Red Dead Revolver. Originally a Capcom project, it was cancelled before Rockstar swooped in and published it. So we have this to thank for the excellent Red Dead Redemption.

MEMORY CARD

X-Men Origins: Wolverine Uncaged Edition

15 years and two far better films later...

Wolverine leaps through the air to give this lucky guy one of his infamously intense hugs. Awww!

Mention X-Men Origins: Wolverine to a cinephile and they'll probably burst into tears. It's a movie so terrible that it made the swine flu epidemic only the *second*-worst global disaster of 2009, and it honestly wasn't even close. But mention X-Men Origins: Wolverine to people who played the PS3 game and you'll get a very different response.

"The game was genuinely better than the movie," says reader **Aaran Mecalfe**, who isn't simply damning it with faint praise. "If Insomniac's upcoming Wolverine game has taken any inspiration from this magnificent game, then we're all in for a treat."

Magnificent? It's a view shared by **Kyle Lipford**. "This didn't feel like a tie-in, but like an honest effort to make a great Wolverine game. And they accomplished that." These comments aren't outliers. There's a lot of love for Wolvie's PS3 adventure. "In my opinion, the perfect Wolverine game," says **Jerron Berry**. Perfect!

So what's so good about it? It's a linear hack-and-slasher where the most striking thing about it now is how graphic its strikes are, almost a full decade before the R-rated Logan movie. "It was bloody, violent, and had the smoothest gameplay," says **@D3J08**. "Probably in my top three PS3 games."

While we're not sure we'd go *quite* that far, it's still a brutal brain-off treat of a game that's great fun today. Finishing moves are particularly nasty and it's hard not to be impressed with how Raven Software got away with making something 18-rated that was meant to promote a 12A film.

"I remember waking up after a long night playing it and finding a note from my mum saying that Michael Jackson had died," says **Ben Bubb**. "Now I associate the X-Men Origins Wolverine game with Michael Jackson's death. Odd." Thank you, Ben. We can think of no better way to close a Memory Card column than with the most 2009 anecdote we've ever heard.

INFO

PUB Activision

DEV Raven Software

RELEASED ON PS3

RELEASE 2009

IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS...
God Of War III will scratch a similar ultraviolent itch. Or you could patiently wait for Insomniac to finish its new game.

▷ Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

2014

The year it was sadly delisted from digital stores when Activision let the licence expire. Boo!

02

Versions for PlayStation. PS3 got Uncaged Edition (the violent, good one) and PS2 a much lesser game.

01

Reference to Portal's infamous cake in the game. That was still funny back in 2009.

DEFENDING

Ken Amada

Henry Stockdale believes we shouldn't write Persona 3's Ken off after his initial missteps

Of all the SEES members, Ken Amada doesn't win many popularity contests among fans. Admittedly, there's a good reason for that. Whether in real life or videogames, first impressions matter – and Ken doesn't make the greatest initial one. While he didn't commit the deed, his role in a particular tragedy soon after joining the team wins him no favours.

Beyond the obvious symbolism of pointing evokers at your head, depression in Persona 3 is often reflected through each character's trauma. Ken is no different, but his young age means that he's presented differently. Though his father is never mentioned, Ken's life took a nasty turn two years ago after his mother's death when a Persona user lost control.

With no-one believing him and no support network, Ken is a traumatised, suicidal orphan forced to grow up too quickly as he suffers alone. He's a polite soul, intelligent, and surprisingly mature in some areas, but woefully lacking in others. Ken's a victim of circumstance and reaches the incorrect conclusion that he'll avenge his mother's death by killing the killer. The ensuing tragedy lays bare his complexities and leads to considerable growth, and I'd consider him Persona 3's most misunderstood character. Granted, the original game and FES didn't help by not providing him a social link, offering less room for personal development. Regardless, this event marks a clear turning point and Reload provides the best version of Ken so far.

Across the remake's new Link Episodes, Ken learns to live for himself while showing considerable thoughtfulness towards others on the team. Heading into a rough part of the city just to find tea for Mitsuru is particularly sweet. After everything he suffered beforehand, it's time we finally give him a break.

"I TRAINED IN SECRET FOR A LONG TIME, SO I COULD AVENGE MY MOTHER'S DEATH. THAT WAS THE ONLY TIME I COULD FORGET THE PAIN..."

While sparring with the protagonist, Ken explains what kept him going through terrible times.

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Persona 3 (and the FES, Portable, and Reload versions)

STATS
Ken named a hamster 'Hamburger' because that's the dinner his mother made him on the night they bought the pet.

Originally, Ken was meant to use darts as a weapon before Atlus settled on a spear.

Ken is probably lactose intolerant, and can be seen complaining about how milk "hurts my stomach sometimes."

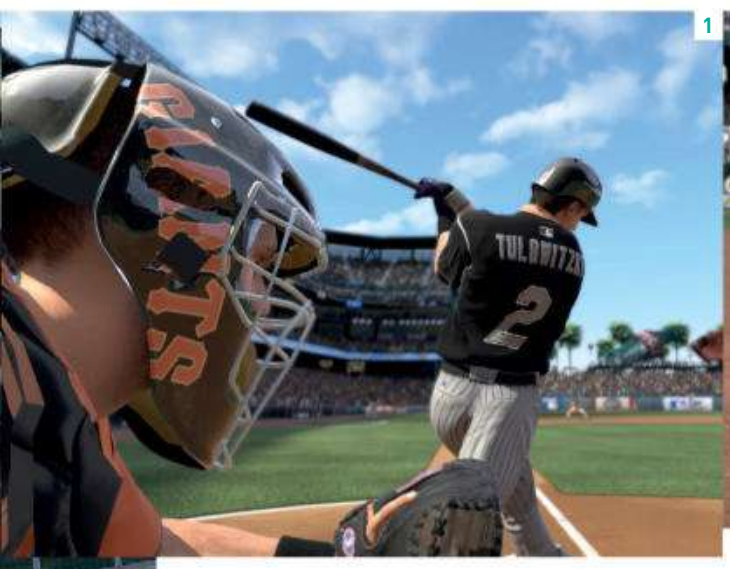
SPIN-OFFS
Persona 3: Dancing In Moonlight, Persona 4 Arena Ultimax

HOW TO PLAY?
Persona 3 Reload, PS Store and physical, £59.99; Persona 3 Portable, PS Store, £17.99

CLASSIC GAME

MLB 11: The Show

King of the swingers still reigns supreme



1 The variable weather captured the feel of a real gameday. 2 Likenesses of players such as Boston's Dustin Pedroia were the best in the business. 3 Home plate collisions had satisfying oomph. 4 American's oldest stadium, Fenway Park, was beautifully recreated. 5 Scoreboard and jumbotron animations were unique to each ballpark.

FC 24 might be the biggest football game going, but you'd never want a single match to last 90 minutes. The average NFL playbook takes pro players months to learn: Madden would lose three-quarters of its audience if such tactical options weren't streamlined. Essentially, all sports sims have to compromise a degree of legitimacy in order to function as a videogame. All, that is, except MLB 11: The Show.

No digital recreation has ever blended activity and authenticity quite like this one. Every strikeout, every leaping catch, every home run looked and felt like the real thing – but was also satisfying in the purest gaming sense. Pitcher repertoires were as deep and detailed as their real-life counterparts, yet required a brilliant mix of timing and dexterity to pull off. Batters such as David Ortiz and Albert Pujols were truly unique to handle. If the uncanny valley could be a sensation in your hands, this would be it.

Part of The Show's majesty is its origin in a bygone era, when the concept of virtual cards and fantasy teams was in its infancy. MLB 11 is the last bastion of classic, old-school franchise modes. You took one team and, over as many seasons as you could muster, developed youth prospects and wheeled-and-dealed towards championship glory. The off-pitch work was as important as on-field skill. You could lose hours working on trades in the hope of snaring one of baseball's biggest names. You went to bed at 2am... and woke up four hours later wanting another hit. In every sense.

This was a sim you could truly enjoy in real-time, too. Let every cutscene and piece of analysis play out and a match could drift towards the two-hour mark. But you were never bored. Matt Vasgersian's play-by-play was constantly on-point, while co-comms Dave Campbell and Eric Karros delivered genuine insights and a dash of flair. It felt like watching a TV broadcast. Not least with lifelike stadia, scanned to intricate detail, with fans going up for foul balls or wandering off to the loos. Even the shirt stitching looked spot-on. And we're talking PS3 era. It was all utterly groundbreaking.

TOP OF THE BOPS

There have been a dozen series entries since, so what made MLB 11 so special? Partly that feeling of a veteran performing at its peak. As well as the PS3 version, this was the last PS2 game released in North America. A handheld PSP edition felt equally unputdownable. You simply *had* to own it in one of these formats, and if you did, you were guaranteed long-term value without spending another penny. No in-game transactions, no pack openings, no moving the goalposts – um, home plate – after your initial investment. Just a year of joy.

> "As well as the PS3 version, this was the last PS2 game released in North America. The PSP edition was equally unputdownable."

Additionally, this was the year Sony went truly family friendly, offering PS Move controls. Nothing was lost for serious players: from single match to 162-game season, reality oozed through its every pore. But for juniors, or newcomers, or anyone wanting some casual big bopping fun, swinging a controller like a baseball bat and watching the ball fly into the stands delivered untold amusement. Again, FC 24 lets you feel a bit like Messi when holding a controller. Imagine if it could inject that energy into your left foot, too.

INFO

PUB Sony
DEV Sony San Diego
RELEASED 2011
GET IT NOW Amazon, £10.21

NEED TO KNOW

1 While the game was only released in the US, the disc itself was region-free.

2 Customisation didn't stop at music – you could also upload and download created players.

3 Brilliantly, umpires were inconsistent, defining their own strike zones and making mistakes.

In one way MLB 11: The Show remains ahead of its modern PS5 counterpart. Thanks to PS3's custom music capabilities, the Sounds Of The Show feature enabled you to personalise batter and pitcher walk-up themes. This wildly popular feature spawned a community dedicated to sharing perfectly tailored sound files, to the point that we still can't hear Linkin Park's Waiting For The End without immediately picturing digital Joey Votto stepping up to the plate. It was so comprehensive that you could spend hours uploading and tweaking files – but as of MLB: The Show 23, the option is no more.

As such, MLB 11: The Show represents the pinnacle of this spectacular series. It played immaculately both on and off the diamond, while customisation options provided the sensation that your edition of the game was truly unique. It scored 10/10 when reviewed by Official PlayStation Magazine. Over a decade later, that number still holds up. ■

PLUS POINTS

Jak And Daxter: The Lost Frontier

We're going Jak to the last game in the series

1 Combat gives you the option of melee, various guns, and powers including slowing down time. 2 There are QTEs, but not too many, and they're surprisingly fair. 3 The script's attempts at humour usually fall flat.

Another PS Plus addition, another PSP entry in a series that no longer exists. In this case, we're looking at the final game, which was quite the send off. But while it was impressive at the time – especially for PSP – it's showing its age now.

Two things run through our minds as we play. The positive thing is 'Wow, the developers really made an effort to give their audience variety'. Technically speaking, this is an action platformer, but it's harder to pigeonhole than most games of its time. There's jumping, there's shooting, and even some puzzles, but there's more, too. We have a small number of rudimentary NPC-filled hubs to wander around,[1] and some sequences where Daxter (the furry fella) mutates into a powerful beast to solve puzzles and smash monsters. There are aerial combat setpieces as well, and even a few ships to choose from after a while.

DAXTER THE FUTURE

However, the *other* thing we keep thinking is 'This could do with a remake'. Not just because the big screen isn't too kind to the graphics, and not even (only) because of the typical issues that PSP ports bring.[2] The controls are in desperate need of updating, particularly for the platforming.

Our hypothetical remake would also sharpen up the script, and introduce a lock-on system for combat. Make no mistake, The Lost Frontier is playable in 2024, and, at times, enjoyable. Some of the puzzles are smart, ship combat has been given as much care as the platforming, and there's a regular supply of new abilities and weapons. But boy, we long for modern comforts.

INFO

PUB Sony

DEV High Impact Games

RELEASED 2009

FOOTNOTES 1 We *do* mean rudimentary; there are no story-rich side-missions or activities here. **2** The inability to use the right stick to adjust the camera is agonising!

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"ABOUT TIME I CAN FINALLY FINISH MY COLLECTION"
Joe Dibb

"DISGRACE TO THE SERIES"
Itay Barzilay

"WHY IN THE HELL DIDN'T THEY USE THE PS2 VERSION SMH"
Steven Taylor

▷ Dreaming up the old **Alone In The Dark: The New Nightmare**

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

Reboots

Wait, haven't we said all this before?

Doom's 2016 reboot introduced new recovery mechanics, glory kill finishers for health, and chainsaw kills for ammo.

2016's Ratchet & Clank title was a tie-in to the movie. Remember that film? Probably not; it wasn't very good.

The PS3 Prince Of Persia reboot (2008) featured Nolan North as the Prince, and absolutely no deaths for the player.

2008's Turok reboot (PS3) allowed you to stealth-kill dinosaurs. ReBoot was a 1998 PS1 game based on a Canadian TV show. **Twisted Metal: Black (2001) had a stronger emphasis on story.** 2013's PS3 Tomb Raider reboot included PvP.

SPYRO MANIAC

Movie production can dragon

With top-tier Hollywood talent on the cast list, you might have thought that a Legend Of Spyro movie was inevitable. So did Activision, at one point – work on The Legend Of Spyro: 3D began, but was never finished, with the publisher apparently deciding to can the project in 2010. There are scraps to be found if you're interested; the script was leaked online over a decade later, in 2022.

2015's Star Wars: Battlefront gave the series sumptuous graphics.

Mortal Kombat 1 is the second reboot for the series, never mind that number.

Alone In The Dark (2024) features monsters designed by Guy Davis, who has worked on multiple Guillermo del Toro movies.

Crash Of The Titans (PS2, 2007) expanded combat with light and heavy attacks, blocks, and dodges. It also gave Crash a tattoo. On his fur. *Right.*

SONIC BUST

If the reboot doesn't fit...

Sonic's had more than his fair share of reimaginings, but the 2006 PS3 soft reboot was a particularly awkward one. There's nothing wrong with making Shadow and Silver playable in addition to Sonic, but going for a more "realistic" art style and tone was, er, questionable. Sega ended up delisting it, effectively erasing it.

▷ Next issue: back to the past with the history of **histories**

#40

Law and disorder

The **Streets Of Rage 4** gang break out of the police precinct slammer. We predict a riot

FORMAT PS4 / **PUB** DOTEMU / **DEV** DOTEMU, LIZARD CUBE, GUARD CRUSH GAMES / **RELEASED** 2020

Given how the Streets Of Rage series started back in 1991, it's quite the shock to see Axel, Blaze, and co thrown behind bars. Where once they used to call upon their police mates for backup, now the law is on their backs. To be fair to the cops, vigilante justice is illegal. But what if the police chief has ulterior motives?

Fortunately, a cell can't hold your chosen beat-'em-up hero for long, as they literally punch the barred door from its hinges. From there it's chaos as alarms wail, cops converge on your position, and all the other cells open, pouring violent thugs into the mix. The resulting brawl is all-against-all, as the police draw upon all their reserves of brutality against you and the street punks alike, and the punks are no less discerning about who they hurt next. Just don't get caught in the middle, and watch out for cops armed with tasers.

It's only once you're out of the holding area that things get serious, though. Now you have to deal with boys in blue geared up with shields and batons. Still, get behind them or smash their protection and their weapons are yours for the taking – see how they like a taste of their own medicine. Then, having beaten your way through that lot, you might think it's time to skedaddle back to the streets, but nope, our ragers head to the musclebound commissioner's office for a bruising showdown. He's in the cash-stuffed pocket of the criminal bosses, you see, and no self-respecting vigilante can allow that to stand.

TIME TO PLAY? The precinct is the second level in the game. After punching through the city's mean streets in the first, you're hoiked off to jail by helicopter before you can say 'police corruption'. The evil Syndicate clearly has its fingers everywhere.

NEXT MONTH

ON SALE 28 MAY

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI V: VENGEANCE

Taking 'playing god' to a whole new level

PLAY

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Future PLC Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Editorial
Editor **Oscar Taylor-Kent** @MrOscarTK
oscar.taylor-kent@futurenet.com – 01225 442244
Managing Art Editor **Milford Coppock**
Operations Editor **Miriam McDonald**
Games Editor **Jessica Kinghorn** @KoeniginKatze
Editorial Director, Games **Tony Mott**
Group Art Director **Warren Brown**

Contributors
Jon Bailes, Rollin Bishop, Siobhán Casey, Laura Francis, Malindy Hetfeld, Luke Kemp, Jeremy Peel, Vic Pheasey, Henry Stockdale, Abbie Stone, Justin Towell, Rachel Watts, Alan Wen, Max Williams, Ben Wilson, Emma Withington

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Media packs are available on request **01225 442244**
GCD UK **Clare Dove clare.dove@futurenet.com**
Account Director **Kevin Stoddart kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com**

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